Pushing the frontiers of research on productive youth development with a focus on the dissemination and application of these findings is the goal of a new and exciting endeavor, the PATHWAYS Post-Doctoral Fellowship Programme funded by the Jacobs Foundation.

Initiated in October 2008, the programme offers the opportunity for outstanding young scholars to work with experts in the field with the aim to develop and advance our understanding of the challenges facing young people today and ways of how to support the development of professional and social competences among young people. A consortium of several leading institutions located in Finland, Germany, Sweden, UK, and the US provides expert input and mentoring to the next generation of researchers engaged in the study of young people’s life from a multidisciplinary perspective.

This first issue of the PATHWAYS Newsletter reports on a productive first year of collaborative work. During 2009 we disseminated our work at national and international level to academic as well as policy audiences. PATHWAYS Fellows presented their work at the 2009 meeting of the Social Research Association in London, the 2010 Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence (SRA) in Philadelphia, and at the meeting of the European Association for the Research of Adolescence (EARA) in Vilnius.

Our research has been well received and was endorsed by key policy makers, including the UK Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, and the Finnish Minister of Education.

Some of the evidence generated is presented here. This includes a summary of a journal article published in Social Indicators Research by Martin Tomasik and Rainer Silbereisen, investigating perceptions of changing demands associated with globalization. A new field of research is introduced: the study of school burnout among school children at different stages of their education, which has been initiated by Katariina Salmela-Aro. An overview of a new book publication on the Transition from School to Work, edited by Ingrid Schoon and Rainer Silbereisen, will be given and comparative findings on the importance of school motivation are outlined.

Upcoming events in 2010 include workshops in Helsinki and in Jena, as well as an international PATHWAYS conference in London, focusing on gender differences in aspirations and attainment.

Please visit our website if you like to join our mailing list or find out more about our work and the team: www.pathwaystoadulthood.org

In Brief

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Globalization in the eye of the beholder

Psychological studies on the individual effects of radical political and economic transformations such as the breakdown of the Berlin wall are rare and those studies that exist have often produced ambiguous results. This is partly because such transformations were considered so powerful and ubiquitous that individual differences in being affected by such changes were thought to be ignorable. Recent research shows that there is vast individual variation in adaptation.

In this article we will present some empirical findings on the prevalence and distribution of demands of social change in Western and Eastern Germany that were recently published in Social Indicators Research. The results reported in this paper were based on an ongoing longitudinal study launched in 2005. About 3000 adults (16-43 years old) in East and West Germany were interviewed about their perception of demands associated with social change and how they dealt with them.

Study participants were asked for their endorsement of several statements (see examples below on a scale ranging from 1 (does not apply at all) to 7 (fully applies)).

Examples of demands of social change in work and family life

Work: When considering the past five years
- it has become more difficult for me to plan my career path.
- today I have to be prepared more for the possibility of reluctantly only working part-time instead of full-time.
- the risk of losing my job has increased.
- my career plans were more often hindered by unforeseen events and circumstances.
- it is now more likely that I will be forced to accept a job requiring lower qualifications than those I have.
- there are currently fewer job opportunities for me.

Family: When considering the past five years
- I have now to take more things into account when it comes to decisions concerning the relationship with my partner or family.
- it is more difficult to decide, given my present life circumstances, whether I want to have another child or not.
- the knowledge and experience of my parents now provide less sense of direction in my life.
- it is more likely that I now have to reckon with being or once again becoming financially long-term dependent on my parents.
- my personal contacts are now less reliable.
- it is now more likely that my partner could leave me.

Who is particularly affected by social change?

We tested hypotheses on who was particularly affected by a high cumulation of demands in work and family life (i.e. many demands perceived to occur at the same time) in order to identify groups in the population that were probably at risk of being overburdened by them. It turned out that for both work and family life the risk for a high load of demands were quite similar. However, we found substantial differences in demand cumulation between participants from Eastern and Western Germany, indicative of the higher level of social change people in the East had to deal with due to the more turbulent historical trajectory and more uncertainties in the labour markets. This finding thus stands for the aftershock still experienced by East Germans almost two decades after political unification.

Participants who were unemployed and in search of work, but also those outside the labour market reported a much higher cumulation of demands. This indicates the major role of employment status as a central resource in times of social change, and is in line with other research which found that those who are outside the labour market are not protected by welfare state regulations or seniority at highest risk to become the “losers of globalization”.

Regarding partnership status we found that compared to participants who were married, those who are divorced or separated experienced more demands. Interestingly, subjects who reported being single or cohabitating were not worse off in terms of demands they experienced. In other words, it seems it is the loss of a relationship that makes people prone to uncertainty and not the different family arrangements they have entered. This conclusion, though, needs entry to the like are at highest risk to become the “losers of globalization” (Hofacker, Buchholz & Blossfeld, 2010). However, Not having the financial resources alone seems less a decisive factor than the combination of lacking income and lacking spousal support which puts people at risk.

Education as a means to strive against the odds

A factor making a difference in just one domain of life was only education, and it was no big surprise to find that subjects with higher education experienced fewer demands in their work context. Education is one of the few resources shielding off the negative consequences of social change – unless there is too much turmoil making educational certificates of the past obsolete. Education can become effective in two different ways. First, higher education is an important asset on the labour market and thus shields off demands related to career uncertainty and unstable work contracts. It allows individuals a smoother transition from school to work life and protects them from precarious career pathways. Second, even if confronted with many demands of social change, higher educated individuals probably have more resources to cope effectively, for instance, they may have better access to information or institutional support.

Where to go next?

We now have established evidence regarding which demands are prevalent in the population and which subgroups are particularly at risk to experience many of the negative consequences social change brings about. Particularly at risk are the unemployed, especially if they also have experienced a separation from their partner, people of low education, and those from Eastern Germany.

Future research will address, for instance, questions about antecedents of resilience vis-a-vis an overload of demands of social change by utilizing the demands measure as a developmental outcome variable, in order to identify successful pathways into adulthood. Also, we are going to analyse how people’s load of demands changes over time as a function of their personal and social resources, and of their way to negotiate these demands. This will enable us to identify further risk and protective factors for a high confrontation with social change, and to delineate ways of dealing with social change that are adaptive in terms of the successful mastery of age-appropriate developmental tasks, subjective well-being or health.

References


The transition from basic education to upper secondary school is a challenge for many young people. According to a recent study of school burnout among Finnish school children at different stages of their education, upper secondary school has been identified as a particularly challenging stage for many young people (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen & Nurmi, 2008). School burnout is a chronic school-related stress syndrome which manifests as exhaustion, cynicism about school and feelings of inadequacy (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen & Nurmi, 2009). Success-oriented female upper secondary school pupils are at the greatest risk, as up to 20% of them suffer from school burnout.

Katarina Salmela-Aro
Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies at the University of Helsinki

Success-oriented girls are high achievers but they also develop burnout and tend to develop feelings of inadequacy, in particular, in upper secondary school. By contrast, boys who enter upper secondary school tend to develop a more cynical, negative stance towards school. The FinEdu study was carried out in the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies comprising 1,800 young people. It was funded by the Academy of Finland and the Jacobs Foundation.

The study focused particularly on students’ tendencies to well-being or problems during transitional stages in their educational life. Transitions from one stage of education to the next have an impact on the well-being of young people and they need support during these life stages. A healthy level of self-respect is a protective factor.

School burnout is a phenomenon to be taken seriously, as it can lead to depression later in life (Salmela-Aro, Holopainen & Savolainen, in press) and delay further educational transitions (Vasalampi, Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, in press).

The role of school engagement
For the first time in Finland, research was also conducted on burnout and academic engagement among students in higher education (Salmela-Aro, 2009). The data was provided by the Finnish Student Health Service (FSHS) and comprised information on 5,200 students. Results show that one in ten students in higher education suffers from burnout and one in three is at risk. However, the good news is that one in four students in higher education feel engagement for their studies. School engagement is characterised by energy, dedication and an ability to become absorbed in the work (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen & Nurmi, 2009).

The research evidence suggests that compared to other disciplines, medical students were most dedicated to their studies and least likely to suffer from burnout.

Students’ engagement with their studies declines over time, which raises the question of what happens to the highly motivated students who enter higher education. A sense of optimism during university studies along with high self-esteem tend to predict job satisfaction ten years later on, while an avoidance strategy tends to predict work-related burnout.

Commitment to studies predicts lesser probability of burnout in working life
Strategies used in handling stress and responsibilities during university studies could indicate whether a person is likely to suffer burnout during his or her early career. If a student experiences increase in optimism while in university, he or she is more likely to show dedication toward work and engagement toward his or her career. Constant avoiding of tasks, on the other hand, could forecast dissociating oneself from one’s work as well as an augmented likelihood of exhaustion and burnout after entering working life.

The research findings demonstrate that young people who experience burnout will be substantially influenced the large-scale reform which will be conducted in Finland.

References
Transition from school to work

Globalisation, Individualisation and patterns of diversity

Edited by Ingrid Schoon Institute of Education, University of London and Rainer K. Silbereisen Center for Applied Developmental Science at the University of Jena, Germany

This volume makes an important contribution to the growing literature on the transition from school to work. It provides a unique perspective on the global changes that have transformed school-to-work transitions since the 1970s, offers an integrative conceptual framework for analysis, and promotes a comparative, cross-national understanding of school-to-work transitions in a changing social context. The articles assembled in this volume compare and assess variations in school-to-work transitions across Europe and North America, providing empirical evidence on how young people negotiate the different options and opportunities available and assessing the costs and returns associated with different transition strategies. Unlike many other volumes on this subject – which are pitched at either the macro or micro level – this volume attempts to integrate both perspectives, capturing the complexity of this critical life course transition. Furthermore, the authors address policies aimed at improving the capacity of individuals to make effective transitions and at enabling societies to better coordinate educational and occupational institutions.

"This book will have a lasting impact on the field"

Rand Conger, University of California, Davis

"Transitions from School to Work offers an embedded, relevant, positive, and global developmental scientific perspective on a critical life-course transition"

Wim Koos, Utrecht University

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School motivation predicts career development – even in the face of adversity

School engagement among university students has shown to improve performance and prevent burn-out after entering working life (Salmela-Aro, Tolvanen, & Nurmi, 2009). The role of school motivation and engagement in promoting successful career development has also been established among adolescents within the British and US context. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that school motivation and engagement is an important resource capacity for younger students planning their careers.

Based on findings from the British cohort studies, it could be shown that school motivation expressed at age 16 is associated with educational and occupational aspirations (Schoon, 2010), time spent in full-time education (Schoon, 2008), the timing and sequencing of family and career transitions as well as adult socio-economic status (Schoon, Martin & Ross, 2007; Ross et al., 2009). School motivation also acts as a ‘reserve capacity’ enabling young people to turn around a potentially problematic transition, such as early school leaving and teenage parenthood (Sacker & Schoon, 2007, Schoon & Polak, in press).

The importance of school engagement as a potential antecedent to declining academic achievement, for promoting a love for learning that will last for a lifetime and not just the schooling period cannot be underestimated, especially as there is evidence to suggest that school motivation and engagement is maladaptive to interventions (Eccles, 2004; Fredricks, Alfeld & Eccles, 2010).

Raising interest and engagement in school is a crucial lever for setting in motion positive chain reactions, for opening up opportunities and new perspectives, and supporting engagement with society and its institutions.

References

Conference announcement

Gender differences in aspirations and attainment

This conference will bring together experts from different disciplines and from different countries, drawing on evidence from longitudinal studies and large scale surveys to examine the multiple influences on gendered career choices and development in a changing social context. It aims to examine antecedents, correlates, and outcomes associated with gender differences in career aspirations and attainment in a global context. The conference will take an explicit longitudinal perspective, addressing issues related to gender and social inequalities in motivation and attainment during the school years and in the transition to adult roles.

We’re hoping the event will help to shape the next wave of research on gender differences in career choice and attainment, and its application to practice and policy development around the world.

Key topic areas to be addressed are:
- Early influences (childhood and adolescence).
- Life planning: how do young people see themselves and their futures.
- Adulthood: gender differences in career pathways and attainment across domains (work, income, family, health and well-being) and their link to earlier influences.
- Social, economic, institutional, and cultural constraints and opportunities: how is career planning and attainment shaped by structural forces such as social background, policy agenda, labour market opportunities, and economic cycles.
- Methodological considerations.

Where
Institute of Education, London, UK

When
12-13 July 2010

This conference is co-sponsored by the Jacobs Foundation and the ESRC Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES)

For more information and to request an invitation please see our website or contact our organiser Clare Sullivan:
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- The major objective of the programme is to promote the next generation of researchers through funding, mentoring and collaboration.
- The mission of this Collaborative Post-Doctoral Fellowship Programme is to stimulate innovative, interdisciplinary, and comparative research of productive youth development.
- Our programme brings together experts in the field from the UK, Germany, Finland, Sweden and the US from seven international Universities.
- We engage with different stakeholders in how best to equip young people for mastering the challenges of growing up in a changing social context.

Principal Investigators and participating institutions

- Lars Bergman – Stockholm University
- Jacquelynne S. Eccles – University of Michigan
- Katariina Salmela-Aro – University of Helsinki
- Barbara Schneider – Michigan State University
- Ingrid Schoon – Institute of Education, University of London
- Rainer K. Silbereisen – University of Jena
- Ulrich Trautwein -University of Tübingen

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