



Pathways to Adulthood: Towards a Unifying Framework

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For a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of young people making their way to productive adulthood, a unifying, interdisciplinary framework is needed that accounts for the multiple influences on young people's lives. The processes shaping pathways to adulthood are multifaceted, including macroeconomic conditions, institutional structures, social background, gender, and ethnicity, as well as individual resources such as ability, motivation, and aspirations. In the history of social science research, there have been persistent attempts to develop a common interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary theoretical framework for the study of human development in context, bringing together expertise from the fields of psychology, sociology, and economics (Baltes, 1997; Diewald & Mayer, 2008; Elder & Caspi, 1988, 1990; Featherman & Lerner, 1985). Commonalities of concern include, first, the acknowledgement that development takes time and that it reflects cumulative experiences (e.g., the accumulation of individual resources such as educational credentials). Second, human development is embedded within social contexts, ranging from interactions with significant others to macrosocial circumstances. Third, specific transitions, such as from school to work, are seen as developmental tasks that challenge individual actors as well as institutional regulations. Fourth, individual decision making is bounded by social institutions and the wider macrosocial conditions.

Despite these commonalities, there continues to be a discipline-specific focus on dominant explanatory factors and guiding concepts. Economic models of youth transitions focus mainly on the supply and demand side of the labour market and examine transition experiences in terms of 'rational choice' based on a cost-benefit analysis that aims to maximise personal profit. Yet, the notion of rational choice does not necessarily take into account the role of social and cultural resources, individual values, or preferences (Walther, 2009; Jones, 2009). Cultural variations and the role of social structures in human development are the primary focus of sociology, whereas the multiple facets of individual functioning are the main concern of psychology. The disciplines meet where they aim to examine the interactions between individual and context. This interconnection has been recognised; yet,

research has developed independently in recent decades. Within sociology, research has focused on the study of the life course as externally shaped by institutions, structural opportunities, and historical change, in which life-course dynamics and expressions of individual agency are contingent on a given sociohistorical context (Elder, 1998). Psychology, conversely, has concentrated on the study of individual adaptation and development across the life span, conceptualised as lifelong adaptive processes. Its interests lie within the study of principles of self-regulation and psychological functioning, such as the model of selective optimisation and compensation (Baltes, 1997). Although the malleability of individual development and functioning through social influences is acknowledged within psychology, the focus is mostly on the more proximal social contexts, such as the family, social networks, and peers, rather than on more distal sociohistorical or institutional influences (Roberts, 2007).

For psychologists to take into account the role of institutions and social structures might contribute to a better understanding of individual adaptation in times of social change and provide the means to assess how social and institutional change is affecting individual functioning. For sociologists and economists to take into account individual motivation and preferences will result in a better understanding of individual decision making and choice, processes involved in skill acquisition, and modes of individual agency. An integrated approach would enhance our understanding of human behaviour in a changing social context and enable us to answer questions such as: How does the social get under the skin? What is the role of structure and agency in shaping transitions to adulthood? How do individuals respond to and cope with a sudden downturn in employment opportunities or increased pressure to continue with further education? What is the role of life planning and motivation in steering young people on their paths to adulthood?

To answer these questions we suggest an integrative framework for the study of pathways to adulthood within a varied and changing social context. Our approach is inspired by four sources: a.) the transactional theory of human development with its emphasis on multiple interacting spheres of influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, 1995;

Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), b.) life course theory with its focus on the temporal dimension and the notion of control cycles as linkage between change on the macrolevel and individual adaptation (Elder, 1985, 1998); c.) theories of developmental regulation (Baltes, 1997) or control striving (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995); and d.) the theory of stage x environment fit (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). These four elements led us to a comprehensive developmental-contextual model, shown in Figure 1 that represents the blueprint for the research conducted by the Fellows of the PATHWAYS PROGRAMME.

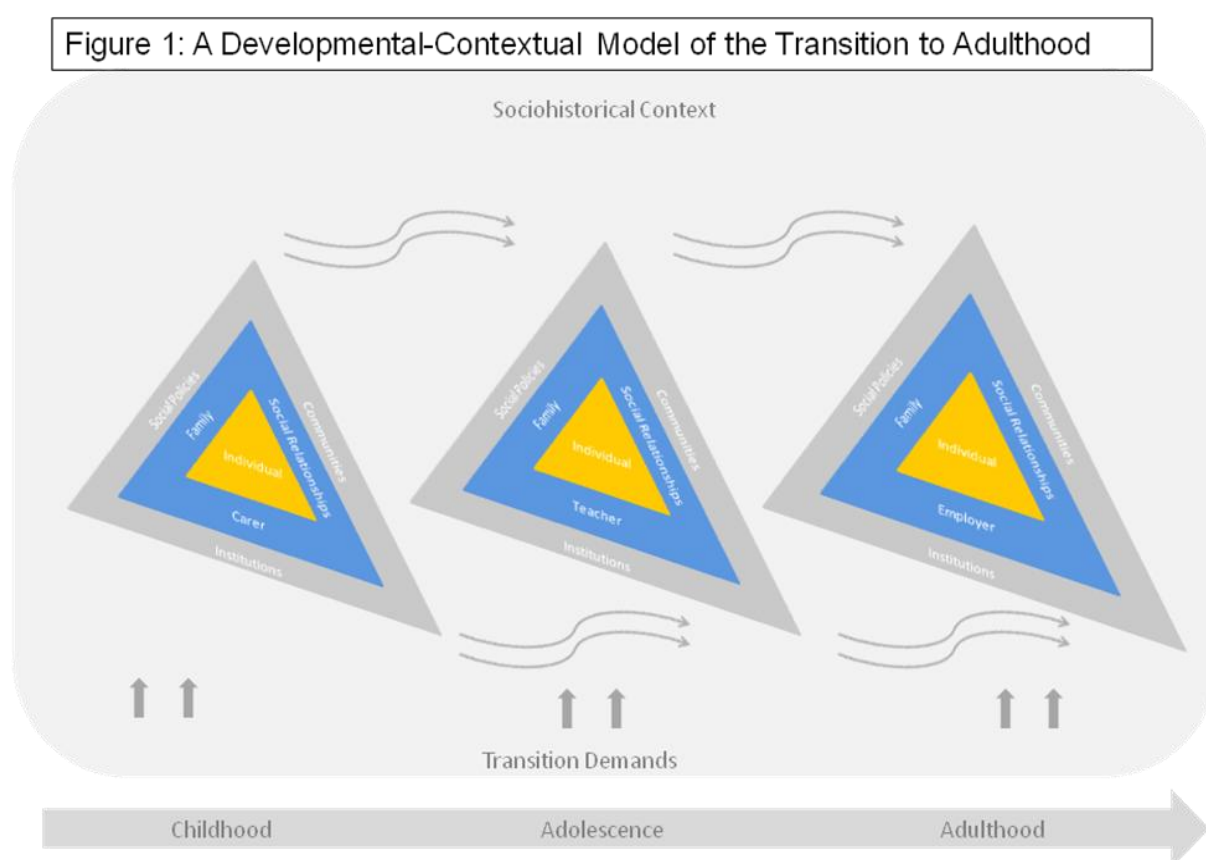


Figure 1 illustrates the different spheres of influence shaping individual development and adjustment. The model differentiates between characteristics of the individual, the family, social networks, and institutional contacts, such as carers, teachers, or employers. Interactions between these key players are shaped by their embeddedness in varied neighbourhoods and communities, institutional regulations, and social policies, which in turn are influenced by the wider socio-historical and

cultural context. Notably the varied spheres do not exist in isolation, but are inter-related and mutually interdependent.

The model is a developmental model, allowing us to assess the dynamic interactions between individual and context taking place over time (Bergman et al., 2000; Bergman, 2001). Any point in the life span has to be understood as the consequence of past experience and as the launch pad for subsequent experiences and conditions. For example, early adjustment patterns influence later adjustment, and early risk experiences are linked to the experience of risk at later life stages (Schoon, 2006). Early experiences and the meanings attached to them are carried forward into consequent situations. Yet, life-long development may also involve processes that do not originate at birth or early childhood but in later periods. The Fellows and PIs engaged in the PATHWAYS PROGRAMME will examine each of these aspects in more detail, generating a more comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of the multiple factors and processes shaping the transition to adulthood in varied and changing social contexts:

Individual Characteristics

Individual characteristics clearly play a role in determining the life path, and the notion that individuals are active agents that take control over their environment is central to the life-course perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder, 1985,1998). The focus of investigation will lie on specific aptitudes and skills, such as intellectual, academic, socio-affective, behavioural and other competences, as well as the developmentally instigative characteristics such as differential interests, values, beliefs, and goals. By recognising and exercising their own competencies, interests, and values, individuals formulate expectations by projecting oneself into the future. The formulation of ambitions, aspirations, or a life plan helps to direct and guide the transition from present to the future (Eccles, 2009; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Schoon, 2006).

Human agency, however, has to be understood as being constrained by available options and real world constraints. Social origin, gender, and ethnicity influence the range of options available to the individual, as do historical events beyond individual

control, such as changes in the labour market, economic downturn, or the outbreak of war (Elder, 1998). The Programme Fellows will thus examine the role of various social contexts in shaping the acquisition and maintenance of individual competences and motivation. Examples are structural forces and constraints as well as socialization experiences within the family (see project proposals of Bask, Chow, Duckworth). We furthermore will assess the role of motivation in shaping future transitions and outcomes, such as psychological, economic, and physical wellbeing (Ashby, Chow, Tsai). We also take into account that expectations and aspirations might have to change and will have to be modified depending on the social reality the individual encounters. Compromises might be necessary, adjusting aspirations and self-evaluations that were either too high or too modest (Baltes, 1987; Heckhausen, 1999). The notion of goal adjustment or disengagement is a crucial theme in the proposal by Tomasik, and will also be addressed by Tsai.

Another factor to be considered is the role of biological dispositions as an underpinning of human development. Sanna Read will join the Network to investigate genetic and environmental influences on personal goals and transition experiences using the Finnish Twin cohort studies, and possibly also the British Cohort Studies.

Family influences

The family environment is a critical context in shaping the development and maintenance of skills, competences, and motivation of young people. Beyond the provision of physical care parents are providing a secure base for children to explore the environment. The quality of parent-child relationships has predictive significance for success in later developmental tasks (Eccles, 1999; Salmela-Aro, xxx; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Schoon et al., 2007; Silbereisen & Todt, 1994). Parental warmth, involvement, and moderate control have been associated with children's adjustment, achievement, and wellbeing, and parental involvement and expectations for their children are crucial in fostering educational attainment and an optimistic outlook to the future. In our research we will take into account that the quality of parent-child interactions can be influenced by socio-economic adversity, that the experience of

economic hardship, income loss, and unemployment can reduce parental responsiveness and care. During the first two years of the Fellowship Programme, we will examine the role of family structure, family socio-economic background, and parenting in shaping individual competences and motivation (Chow, Duckworth, Natale, Tsai), as well as the role of parenting style in shaping economic socialisation (Ashby). We also take into consideration that not only the family of origin but also the family of destination can influence adjustment processes and transition strategies, and will examine how multiple transitions, that is transition into employment and independent living are linked to the assumption of family related roles (Kneale), and how living arrangements in adulthood influence financial management (Ashby). In the future, we want to explore how families need to change their socialization strategies as their children mature and move into and through adolescence and adulthood. Here too families need to be responsive to changes in the economic and political situations in which they live. We need to understand the psychological and social resources families can draw on to help prepare their children for a dynamic and potentially delayed adulthood. Recent economic disruptions make such adaptability critical to understand.

Contact with Institutions: Care-givers, Teachers, Schools and Employers

While during the very early years the family environment is most important in shaping developmental progression, later on variations in care provision and the school environment play a crucial role. When children enter day care or later school they encounter a new world of expectations outside the family. The school environment, in general, is a powerful shaper or a deterrent to the development of individual potential (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Schneider, 2008; Schoon, 2006; Silbereisen & Todt, 1994; Trautwein et al, 2008). School activities, both inside and outside the classroom, the various roles and role expectations, all render the school environment a most important context for shaping the expectations and outlook of young people, and preparing them for the transition from school to work. In the school context the individual has its first encounter with a structured social arena within which to experience the 'sense of industry', the consequences of social and academic competence, competition, and power relationships (Erikson, 1959).

The programme of work developed by our first intake of Fellows will examine the role of teacher expectations and school context in shaping student performance (Duckworth, Natele, Tsai), the antecedents and outcomes associated with various school transitions, including school or college drop-out (Bask, Chow, Duckworth, Tomasik, Tsai) as well as early school leaving (Duckworth, Tomasik). We also focus on variations in school to work transitions, identifying factors and processes enabling individuals to establish themselves in the labour market (Bask, Neale, Tomasik, Tsai). Finding a job, changing jobs, losing jobs, or changing careers are major transitions in the life-course of every individual which are greatly influenced by the nature of the chosen occupations, the necessary requirements for entry, the structure of the organisations in which people work, but also the general economic climate. We make the analysis of opportunities and constraints provided by social structures and a changing historical context a crucial focal point of our investigations (Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009).

In the future, we want to look at the interface between family and other institutions in shaping these individual trajectories.

Social Relationships

Individual development is not only influenced by experiences within the family and other institutional environments. Throughout the life course lives are lived interdependently within networks of shared relationships. There is persisting evidence highlighting the role of social relationships and support which can have important stress-buffering effects during life-course transitions (Bartely et al., 2006; Eccles, 1999; Salmela-Aro, xxx; Schneider and Stevenson, 1999; Schwarzer & Leppin, 1991). Programme activities will address the role of peer relationships and their function as role models for transitions. We will also examine the concept of social comparisons (Festinger, 1954). One can distinguish between upward comparisons (which serve the purpose of motivating development) and downward comparisons (which protect motivational capacities and become important in case of failure) (Heckhausen & Brim, 1997). Social comparisons represent a central mechanism that moderates the effect of external influences (transition-related demands, different opportunities in the social ecology etc.) on the individual (Pinquart & Silbereisen,

2008), and are of interest for studying differences between ecologies such as regions or school classes (big-fish-little-pond-effect). Of particular interest for our Network is the role of peer groups in shaping individual adjustment and motivation (Chow), as well as the role of intimate relationships and family formation in steering the course of transitioning and adjustment (Neale, Tomasik).

Communities and Neighbourhoods

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the effects of neighbourhoods and communities on individual adjustment, following the recognition that neighbourhoods are a crucial context for many young people in contemporary society. It has been argued that neighbourhoods can be considered as the cradle of risk shaping the lives of children, their family, and the wider community (Booth & Crouter, 2001). Children and young people growing up in neighbourhoods with a high proportion of low-income families are at an increased risk of behavioural problems such as aggressive behaviour and academic maladjustment and getting in contact with problematic peer groups and friends (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994), while living in more affluent neighbourhoods would result in better outcomes for children and families (Brooks-Gunn, 1995). Neighbourhood characteristics and particular housing are a key interest of Dylan Kneale, one of our Associate Fellows. Regional opportunities and constraints for transition planning and adjustment are a topic addressed by Martin Tomasik, examining for example the role of low versus high regional unemployment rates in influencing transition strategies, coping and adjustment.

Social policies

Institutional regulations concerning access to education, the labour market, or the provision of support of care and services is another focus of interest (Eccles, Schneider, Silbereisen, Trautwein). Furthermore, on a global comparative level, we also recognise the role of different welfare regimes aiming to protect against the possible risks for individuals' economic and personal well-being due to uncertainties on the structure level. For example, comparisons of experiences in countries characterised by institutional arrangements characteristic of a liberal or social

welfare system, or countries within the Scandinavian model, will bring new insights about the different contexts of youth transitions and how the macro level influences micro level experiences. Previous evidence suggests that current policies are often based on models of youth and youth transitions that do not recognise cultural diversity, multiple obligations, and competing priorities (Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009). Within the PATHWAYS programme we will examine heterogeneity in transition experiences (Bask, Tomasik, Tsai) and aim to inform policy makers about how to appropriately address changing needs of young people and their parents.

Transition Demands

Transition demands are individual-level representations of challenges concerning the assumption of new social roles regarding schooling and training, entry into work and family formation in the face of rapid social changes on the structure level. Especially in a context of increasing globalisation, of demographic and economic change, changes in life-course regimes, demand/supply versatility concerning youth labour, and changing political priorities. These changes come to young peoples' life in a cascaded, multiple-'filtered' fashion depending on the social policies and systems currently in place within a particular country (Silbereisen, Pinguart & Tomasik, in press).

What is experienced as new demands at the individual level reflects more or less accentuated changes of past normative expectations and behaviours regarding the transition into adult roles and the move into independent adulthood. In the face of rapid social change, young people need to negotiate untested and opaque territory characterised by uncertainties about the aims and means. Although this requires capabilities and skills for exploration of the unknown, there are also rather clearly defined new learning requirements that can be achieved in ways known from the past.

Nevertheless, the match between what one brings to a particular transition phase in terms of personal and social resources and what seemingly is expected anew will be experienced as either a healthy challenge or a painful stressor. The balance between demands and resources and resulting patterns of engagement, coping and adjustment are the topic of Martin Tomasik's plan of research, and will also be examined by Angela Chow and Yi-Miau Tsai within a stage x environment fit model.

The wider socio-historical context

For a comprehensive understanding of individual development we cannot isolate individuals and their immediate context from the wider socio-historical context in which their actions are carried out. Transition experiences are embedded and shaped by social contexts, ranging from interactions with significant others to macrosocial circumstances. Aiming to understand development over time underscores the need for investigating the impact of a changing socio-historical context. Societal circumstances beyond the control of the individual, such as economic depression or the outbreak of war, contribute considerably to the development of potential, and a major task confronting the individual throughout the life-course is to cope effectively with a changing social reality (Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000; Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; Silbereisen & Chen, in press).

Globalization is confronting today's youth with additional challenges, ranging from stresses associated with being a member of various stigmatized social groups to increasing religious and ethnic intolerance and distrust. Although the exact manifestations of these processes vary across countries, virtually all nations in the world are dealing with the tensions associated with xenophobia, immigration, acculturation, and heterogeneity of values and life perspectives. We want to bring these issues to the fore in our future projects.

In general, the Programme strives to contribute to a better understanding of productive youth development in context, taking into account multiple levels of

influence, multiple transition demands, and the varied and changing socio-historical context in which development takes place. We aim to conceptualise and provide evidence of positive adaptation and adjustment in different contexts in order to inform policy and individual decision making.

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