

Adaptations to changing times: Agency in context

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British society has changed greatly over the past half century. Increasing uncertainty about economic and social developments is becoming a distinctive feature of modern industrialized countries, affecting the life chances and opportunities of young people making the transition from dependent childhood into independent adulthood. Summarizing recent findings from data collected from about 30,000 individuals born 12 years apart, in 1958 and 1970 respectively, this paper examines the role of individual agency in shaping educational and occupational transitions as well as the assumption of family-related roles in times of social change. The data suggest that societal change and the associated increasing uncertainty does not impact on all individuals in the same way, and that there has been an increasing polarization between those who are able to benefit from the economic and social transformations and the ones who are excluded, largely because of their relatively disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances and lack of access to opportunities in education and employment. It is concluded that human agency processes cannot be studied in isolation from the sociohistorical context in which they are embedded.

La société britannique a beaucoup changé pendant le dernier demi-siècle. Une incertitude croissante quant aux développements économique et social est devenue une caractéristique distinctive des pays industrialisés modernes, affectant les chances de vie et les opportunités des jeunes gens qui font leur transition d'une enfance dépendante à l'âge adulte indépendant. En résumant les résultats récents de données collectées sur environ 30 000 individus nés en 1958 et en 1970 respectivement c'est-à-dire avec une différence d'âge de 12 ans, cet article examine le rôle de l'action individuelle dans la formation des transitions éducative et occupationnelle aussi bien que la supposition de rôles reliés à la famille pendant le changement social. Les données suggèrent que le changement sociétal et l'incertitude croissante associée n'ont pas un impact sur tous les individus de la même manière. En plus, il y a une polarisation croissante entre ceux qui sont capables de bénéficier des transformations économique et sociale et ceux qui sont exclus, largement à cause de leurs circonstances socio-économiques relativement défavorisées et le manque d'accès aux opportunités en éducation et en emploi. Il est conclu que les processus de l'action humaine ne peuvent être étudiés en les isolant du contexte socio-historique dans lequel ils sont ancrés.

La sociedad británica ha cambiado de manera importante durante el último medio siglo. La incertidumbre en aumento sobre los desarrollos económicos y sociales se ha convertido en una característica distintiva de los países industrializados modernos, lo que afecta las oportunidades de vida de la gente joven que se encuentra en la transición de la niñez dependiente a la edad adulta independiente. Resumiendo los hallazgos recientes de datos recogidos de 30,000 individuos nacidos con 12 años de diferencia, en 1958 y 1970 respectivamente, este trabajo examina el papel de la agencia individual, o manejo personal de los recursos propios, al moldear las transiciones educativas y ocupacionales, así como de la adopción de roles relacionados con la familia en tiempos de cambio social. Los datos sugieren que el cambio social y la incertidumbre en aumento asociada no impacta a todos los individuos de la misma manera, y que ha habido una polarización creciente entre aquéllos que pueden beneficiarse de las transformaciones económicas y sociales y los que quedan excluidos, principalmente por sus circunstancias socioeconómicas de relativa desventaja y la falta de acceso a las oportunidades educativas y de empleo. Se concluye que los procesos de agencia humana no pueden estudiarse aisladamente del contexto socio histórico en el que están inmersos.

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There is a paradox in our modern Western societies: Despite dramatic economic and social advances witnessed during the second half of the 20th century, inequalities of opportunities and life chances have remained. Children raised in socio-economically disadvantaged families are at an increased risk of a wide range of adverse outcomes including poor academic achievement, lowered aspirations for the future, and adjustment problems in later life as reflected in their own occupational attainment, social position, and indicators of developmental health and well-being. The consequences of growing up in a disadvantaged family environment can continue into adulthood or even into the next generation (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Garmezy, 1991; Rutter & Madge, 1976). The continued marginalization of certain individuals and groups within affluent countries has become a growing concern in social research, calling into question the values of modern society (Dalbert & Sallay, 2004; Sennett, 2003; Wilkinson, 2005). This paper examines key findings of research and assesses the implications of societal change and social inequality on individual adaptation across the life course. The particular emphasis lies on the role of individual agency processes in the transition from dependent childhood to independent adulthood in times of sociohistorical change. Adaptation is defined in terms of how individuals negotiate key life course transitions, such as the preparation for work, partnership, and family formation. Suggestions will be made regarding what can be done to improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged and to enable individuals to develop their full potential.

The approach is guided by assumptions formulated within the life course theory of human development, with its emphasis on multiple interacting spheres of influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), as well as the temporal dimension and developmental effects of social change (Elder, 1974/1999, 1998). According to the life course approach, human development is shaped by a set of principles including lifelong development, individual agency, timing of events, linked lives, and embeddedness of development in a sociohistorical context (Elder, 1998). One of the key concepts of life course theory concerns transitions or changes from one state to another, such as entry into paid employment, partnership formation, or entry into parenthood. Transitions provide a framework for individuals to negotiate their life, and offer opportunities and constraints for individual agency. Social change may affect the course of transitions, impacting on the timing or the

sequencing of events. Adopting the life-course perspective makes it possible to link individual time with historical time, and to investigate how individual lives are mutually shaped by personal characteristics and the sociohistorical context, enabling the integration of process and structure.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEXT

The evidence presented here is based on research using data collected for two British Birth Cohorts: the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70). Laboratories for the study of human development are rare, and the closest one can get, if the opportunity arises, is to compare the experiences of two or more birth cohorts. The two cohort studies thus offer the unique opportunity to gain a better understanding of the context dependency of adjustment in changing times, and to assess the impact of social change on individual lives, covering the experiences of over 30,000 individuals born 12 years apart (more details regarding the samples, study design, and measurement instruments can be found in Schoon, 2006).

During the lifetimes of the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts, British society has witnessed considerable transformations of almost every aspect of its way of life. The 1958 cohort grew up during a period of extraordinary economic growth described by Hobsbawm (1995) as a “golden age,” while the 1970 cohort experienced their childhood during a time of increasing instability and insecurity, the so-called “crisis decades” (Hobsbawm, 1995). Between 1979 and 1987 the UK witnessed the sharpest rise in unemployment since the Second World War, following the decline in manufacturing jobs and a rapid growth in the service industries (Gallie, 2000). Youth unemployment rates, in particular, soared to record levels (Hart, 1988; White & Smith, 1994). During the same period there was a continuous rise of women entering the labour market (Gallie, 2000).

The impact of these changes affected the two cohorts differently. While the earlier-born cohort entered the labour market just before the onset of the major recession, the later-born cohort completed their education at its peak. Young people born just 12 years apart encountered different sets of opportunities and obstacles when constructing their own life courses. Changes in the labour market, characterized by the rapid spread of information technologies, involved increasing

demands by employers for highly qualified recruits (Bynner, 2001a). Across most societies the average age of primary employment has been pushed back, as more education and skill development is required to take on adult roles and to balance the increasingly complex and challenging adult world (Arnett, 2000; Bynner, 2001a; Shanahan, 2000). While in the UK most young people born in 1958 left school at age 16 and moved directly into a job, by the 1990s most young people continued in full-time education, which was once the preserve of a privileged minority (Bynner & Parsons, 1997; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). Poor educational achievement, which presented no significant barrier in the past, now predicts real difficulties in finding employment.

POLARIZATION OF YOUTH TRANSITIONS

The educational expansion did not reduce social inequalities in educational opportunity. Young people from working-class backgrounds were less likely than their middle-class peers to remain in school beyond the minimum leaving age, to leave school with recognized qualifications, or to enter higher education. The degree of inequality in educational attainment had actually not reduced but rather increased for the later-born cohort, especially for men (Bynner, 2001a; Schoon et al., 2002). There is also evidence to suggest that relatively privileged cohort members have benefited most from the expansion of higher education, while higher ability children from disadvantaged backgrounds have missed out (Machin, 2003; Schoon, McCulloch, Joshi, Wiggins, & Bynner, 2001). Comparing the educational transitions of children from poor backgrounds with those of their more privileged peers, it could be shown that academically able children from disadvantaged families were not achieving to the same level as their more privileged peers. By the time they reach mid-childhood, children from disadvantaged backgrounds who demonstrated above-average academic abilities at school entry have been overtaken by children from more affluent backgrounds who showed lesser ability (Schoon, 2006). In adulthood they were less likely to achieve degree-level qualifications, were less likely to enter prestigious occupations, and were more likely to be unemployed when compared to their more privileged peers. They also showed higher rates of depression and felt less in control of their lives, suggesting that the experience of social inequality can corrode the lives of people experiencing it, affecting their life chances as well as their health and well-being.

ESCAPE FROM DISADVANTAGE

Although there is a strong relationship between exposure to cumulative adversity and developmental outcomes, the relationship is by no means deterministic. There is considerable diversity in the way in which individuals respond to adversity, and a number of children growing up in socio-economically disadvantaged families go on to lead rewarding and well-adjusted lives (Garmezy, 1991; Werner & Smith, 1992, 2001). Previous research has revealed three broad sets of variables operating as resource factors on an individual, family, and wider social level (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992). Also, within the cohort studies the triarchic set of resource factors could be established (Bynner, 2001b; Osborn, 1990; Pilling, 1990; Schoon, 2006; Schoon & Parsons, 2002b).

Children who showed positive adjustments despite the experience of early socioeconomic disadvantage generally performed well in most school tests, showed few persistent behavioural problems, and had many hobbies and social contacts. They enjoyed school, believed in their own ability, and had high aspirations for the future, i.e., they wanted further education after the age of 16 and aspired to a professional career. They tended to grow up in a stable and supportive family environment, where the parents showed interest in their child's education and wanted their child to continue with education after the minimum school leaving age. Positive adjustment was facilitated by parents who regularly read to their children, visited their school, talked to teachers about their progress, and took the children out for joint activities. Another factor was a caring father who also helped the mother with the household chores. Regarding aspects of the wider social context, the findings underline the importance of available external support systems and social ties within the neighbourhood, the local area, or institutional settings. An important factor was the school environment setting high standards and expectations, providing support for students and parents, as well as encouraging teachers who recognized the children's capabilities and supported their development.

Being able to draw on these resources may impede or halt the impact of adverse experiences, modifying the negative effects of adverse life circumstances, and promote positive adjustment in the face of adversity. The outcomes following early adversity can, however, be quite diverse, with long-term effects depending on the nature of subsequent life experiences (Rutter, 1989). The

odds for maladjustment are increased given the experience of continuous and cumulating risk, and only a few of the most disadvantaged cohort members could completely escape the conditions of their family origin. The ones who made it could usually draw on a wider range of psychosocial resources than their more vulnerable peers, whereby the accumulation of resources could outweigh the risks (Pilling, 1990; Schoon, 2006). Specific protective factors that modified the impact of risk exposure, even among the most disadvantaged, included supportive social ties and stimulating school experiences, as well as parental involvement and commitment to education, which helped young people to beat the odds.

TIMING OF LIFE COURSE TRANSITIONS

Another factor to be considered here is the timing of transitions into new social roles, such as employment and parenthood. Transitions do not occur as discrete, clearly bounded occurrences, but are interlinked. Early life transitions can have developmental consequences, affecting subsequent transitions and setting in motion a chain of cumulative advantages and disadvantages, with implications for other life domains (Elder & Shanahan, in press). For example, an early entry into the labour market is associated with truncated education, reduced employment opportunities, and less financial remuneration. Early parenthood, in particular, has been linked to exclusion from educational and occupational opportunities and less advantageous adult outcomes (Hobcraft & Kiernan, 2001).

Women generally experience the transition into adult roles earlier than men (Ferri & Smith, 2003). In both cohorts we find a similar proportion of young women who became mothers before age 20: 11% in NCDS and 12% in BCS70, illustrating that teenage fertility rates have not altered significantly for the two cohorts—or more generally since the 1960s as evidenced in National Statistics (Kiernan, 1997). The issue of teenage childbearing did not cause as much concern in the 1970s, however, as it did in the 1980s, or as it does today. A series of other demographic changes brought increased attention to the issue, in particular the declining rate of marriages among the young (Furstenberg, 2002). In the NCDS cohort the majority (79%) of teenage mothers were married by the age of 20, compared to only about a fifth of young mothers in BCS70 (Schoon & Martin, 2005). The data suggest that young mothers in the later-born cohort were more negatively affected by the step

into early motherhood than cohort members born in 1958, especially regarding their employment chances and financial situation (Schoon, Martin, & Ross, in press). The increasing importance of qualifications and further education for increasing one's job prospects meant that young mothers who had to give up school or further education in order to bring up their children faced increasing difficulties in finding a rewarding and well-paid job.

Furthermore, young women from less privileged backgrounds are generally more likely to become teenage mothers than their more privileged peers (Kiernan, 1997). There has, however, been a shift in the polarization between the classes: While in NCDS the risk of teenage pregnancy was greatest among girls stemming from manual working-class families, in BCS70 the division is between the skilled and the unskilled (Schoon & Martin, 2005). This could suggest that those who become teenage parents in the later-born cohort are relatively more disadvantaged when compared to the earlier-born cohort, as they are less able to draw on educational resources within the family context, with all that implies for subsequent educational and occupational careers and financial remuneration. In a society where participation in further education has generally increased, and where more and more young people delay the step into parenthood until their late 20s or early 30s, a deviation from this dominant pattern of a prolonged timetable for transitions into adult roles has worsened the socioeconomic situation of young families because of shrinking social and economic opportunities.

Yet great changes can occur over the life course from childhood to maturity, and events such as teenage parenthood have neither uniform nor unique consequences. As in other studies (Furstenberg, 2002; Werner & Smith, 2001), many teenage mothers in the cohorts defied their popular stereotype and did surprisingly well in later life. They did not achieve to the same level as women who delayed childbirth until their 30s (especially regarding qualifications and occupational status). Yet, in their early 30s, nearly half of early mothers were self-supporting, most were living in a stable relationship, over half were in paid employment (although most of them part-time), and only about 1 in 10 lived in a household where no partner was working (Schoon & Martin, 2005). It is thus not feasible to talk in terms of successful or unsuccessful transitions to adulthood here, since "success" and "failure" are constructed differently by young people in different circumstances. What is needed is a more detailed conceptualization of transition patterns,

recognizing the heterogeneity and interrelation of, and the conflicts between, career and family transitions.

BOUNDED AGENCY

Individual differences in negotiating transitions are associated with a variety of conditions, including development before the transition, the timing of the transition, and the wider sociohistorical context in which the transition occurs. Instead of following a prescribed path, young people have to navigate their way to adulthood, trying and choosing from the possible alternatives available to them. Young people actively try to shape and steer the movement from one state to another, yet are constrained by the economic, social, or cultural conditions they encounter (Evans, 2002; Heinz, 2002).

During adolescence young people develop aspirations for the future, which come together as a life plan directing and guiding the transition from dependent childhood to independent adulthood (Clausen, 1993). The formulation of aspirations or a life plan helps to direct and guide the transition from the present to the future. By recognizing and exercising one's own competencies, interests, and values, individuals formulate expectations by projecting themselves into the future. Teenage aspirations can act like a compass to help chart a life course and provide direction for spending time and energy (Nurmi, 1993). There is consistent research evidence to suggest that educational and career aspirations developed during adolescence can have lifelong significance, influencing consequent educational and occupational attainment (Clausen, 1993; Elder, 1974/1999; Schoon & Parsons, 2002a).

Yet, individual aspirations, which can be understood as the expression of human agency, are always manifested in circumstances that are more or less constrained by available options. Opportunities for development are affected by the prevailing socioeconomic conditions, e.g., education and training facilities and conditions of labour market entry, as well as by legal aged-based criteria defining rights and responsibilities (Elder, 1998). To gain a better understanding of the variability of opportunities and pathways into adulthood, Shanahan (2000) has developed a structure–agency perspective illustrating the dynamic interplay between person and context, focusing on how goal-directed behaviour of young people is experienced differently in different social settings, and introducing the notion of bounded agency to

describe the influences of social origin, gender, and ethnicity on the range of options available to the individual.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

Individual agency can furthermore be limited due to historical events beyond individual control, such as changes in the labour market, economic downturn, or discrete historical events such as the outbreak of war (Elder, 1974/1999). There is a close relationship between individual development and societal progress (Silbereisen, 2005). For UK teenagers born in 1958, the predominant pattern was to leave school at the minimum age and to move directly into a job. Most young people who left school in 1974 could expect to obtain employment regardless of their educational attainment, whereas for young people born in 1970 poor educational attainment meant considerably more difficulty in gaining entry to employment (Bynner, 1998). In comparison to the earlier-born cohort, more young people born in 1970 wanted to continue in further education after minimum school leaving age, and aspired to jobs that required further education. There has also been a shift in occupational aspirations. The later-born cohort has generally become more ambitious in their career planning. In comparison to cohort members born in 1958, more young people, especially girls, born in 1970 want a professional job requiring degree-level qualifications. In both cohorts girls are generally more ambitious than boys in both their educational and occupational aspirations (Schoon, 2006).

Aspirations remain, however, to be associated with social background. Young people from working-class families are less likely than their more privileged peers to want continuing education after the minimum school leaving age, or to aspire to a professional career. In developing their ideas about appropriate occupations, young people orient themselves to social class reference groups, and are guided by their parent's aspirations for them (Schoon et al., in press; Schoon & Parsons, 2002a; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986). Parents have, and youngsters adopt, different views about what is an acceptable job depending on their social class (Gottfredson, 1981).

Examining the educational aspirations among parents of the cohort members, it could be shown that parental aspirations for their children had generally increased for the later-born cohort, although social differences in aspirations have remained (Schoon, 2006). Compared to parents of

cohort members born in 1958, more parents of cohort members born in 1970 wanted their children to continue further education. Parental educational aspirations had a significant influence in shaping the academic adjustment of their children (Schoon & Parsons, 2002a), and, as found in previous studies (Catsambis, 1995; Zellman & Waterman, 1998), high levels of parental aspiration are positively associated with the children's aspirations and achievement, regardless of social class factors. The development and maintenance of aspirations is bound up with family circumstances and support, underlining the principle of linked lives—the embeddedness of individual choices with the lives of others.

It has been argued that because of the different opportunities and constraints facing children from privileged and less privileged family backgrounds, young people and their parents use different calculations of the possible costs and benefits of particular educational strategies (Marshall, Swift, & Roberts, 1997). Aspirations for further education and a professional career among less privileged young people are rather more ambitious than the same desires expressed by their more privileged peers, and also might involve more risks. Most young people who left school at minimum school leaving age during the mid 1970s did so to find a job that paid full wages. To forego this generally available opportunity, i.e., to gain relatively secure employment with a living wage, and to continue further education instead, was a relatively rare step to take, especially for young people from disadvantaged family backgrounds. For the later-born BCS70 cohort the odds were furthermore increased, as more young people continued with further education and obtained degree level qualifications.

In both cohorts, and for both advantaged and disadvantaged young people, educational and occupational aspirations were found to be predictive of adult social status (Schoon et al., in press; Schoon & Parsons, 2002a). Yet, whereas among disadvantaged individuals born in 1958 teenage educational aspirations were as strong a predictor of adult social status as educational attachment, for disadvantaged young people born in 1970 exam performance at age 16 has become more important (Schoon, 2006). This finding suggests that young people born in 1958 indeed had better opportunities for career development that were less dependent on their academic attainment, while for the later-born cohort academic attainment became more important in order to succeed, especially for the most disadvantaged (Bynner, Joshi, & Tsatsas, 2000; Schoon

& Parsons, 2002b). Individuals who showed high academic competences and aspirations despite experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage did, however, not succeed to the same extent as young people from more privileged backgrounds, especially so in the later-born cohort (Schoon, 2006).

CONCLUSION

The findings presented here suggest that both structure and agency influence patterns of adaptation in the transition to adulthood. The conceptualization of individuals as actors underscores the active role individuals play in shaping and forming their own life choices, and counters the pessimism associated with a deterministic perspective. Yet, conceptualizing agency in purely individualistic terms is misleading, as this would neglect the continuing importance of social structures and fail to address issues of social stratification and unequal opportunities. Children born into families in different socioeconomic positions have widely differing prospects regarding opportunities for education and employment. Aiming to improve life chances of the most disadvantaged, one would have to recognize the diversity of experiences as well as the importance of social ties. Identifying and building upon the strengths and ambitions of individuals and the families they are born into can promote their own feelings of competence and capability and can stimulate enduring positive changes. The identification of “strengths” has, however, to be congruent with the experiences of marginalized populations. Adult outcomes are often determined not only according to individual capabilities and effort but also by factors beyond individual control. Persisting inequalities call for sustained investment and reform in tackling poverty and inequality, challenging the very existence of an exclusive and divided society.

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