

Coping with Perceived Chances and Risks Associated with Social Change

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Abstract

Social change in the form of political transformation in the context of globalization and individualization is prevalent worldwide. Such change can occur gradually or abruptly and not always as part of people's conscious experience. In such situations, features of the broader ecological contexts in which people live moderate the process of coping. Successfully coping affects well-being and other psychosocial outcomes and in most, but not all instances, requires active engagement, development of a sense of control and capitalizing on proximate social and personal resources. Future research should emphasize cross-national study of objective and subjective outcomes, and the relationships between demands (broadly defined), varieties of mechanisms for coping, and the full range of personal and social resources available for doing so. The aim of such research must be to inform social policies designed to empower people's sense of personal agency and aligned with relevant changes in opportunity structures.

Changes of the societal order affecting human life have happened throughout history, although in recent times such change may have accelerated (Rosa, 2013). Social change can emerge gradually and therefore not necessarily be part of all people's own conscious experience, like the change of belief systems, but it can also happen in a rapid and comprehensive fashion, such as social revolutions everybody experiences. Often both types are interlocked—the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent dissolution of the communist world order, for instance, were rapid and comprehensive, but developments in the following years were overlaid by the emerging consequences of globalization and other worldwide issues, such as the 2007 economic crisis.

WHAT IS INTRIGUING ABOUT THE TOPIC OF SOCIAL CHANGE?

The specific case of social change we deal with in this essay is the combination of political and economic change that occurred in many European countries that had for decades either been under the influence of communist regimes, or were hit by challenges rooted in precarious economic development. After 1990, experiences in post-Soviet states, like those of the Baltic, made it clear that radical changes of the institutional order and the economic system have both losers and winners. As Titma and Tuma (2005) showed, psychological resources played a role in deciding the fate of people soon after societal change, such as their level of self-efficacy prior to the regime change. Where levels were high, individuals were able to deal more successfully with the breakup of institutions by taking the initiative and making a living by own economic activities instead of waiting for a recovery of the occupational opportunities they were used to.

When looking at people affected by the change of societal institutions, probably the most prominent common denominator is the experience of uncertainties, meaning that new expectations concerning individual's behavior are often not transparent and/or one lacks the means to deal with the new challenges. Dealing with uncertainties, like how to accept individual responsibility for one's occupational development by people who were used to the scaffold of strict regulations by the state, requires resources one cannot gain instantly and necessitates drawing on personal attributes and experiences from one's past life, which of course varies, as the example of self-efficacy shows.

Individual agency is critical to the study of adjustment to rapid social change. Individuals differ in their adaptability to a new societal order. For instance, younger people (emerging adults) are notably more flexible in terms of adaptability to new societal values because they are less constrained by an occupational pathway or the responsibility for a family. Further, people differ in basic personality dimensions that appear to be of particular relevance in times of social change, such as *exploration* and *openness* (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009).

Psychological research needs to address the role of such agency factors, but with a strong emphasis on the moderating role of the opportunity structures in regions where people live. The change after the breakdown of the communist order did affect individuals' lives, but not in a direct way. Rather, its effect was through changing social contexts, such as changes in the economy from state-owned to private enterprises, or changes in major institutions of political representation and law. People have to procure information and advice for a new portfolio of behavior patterns, like how to apply for a job by presenting oneself in a way that is suitable for the new situation, from prototypes

embedded in the given context, such as role models for adequate behavior in economically precarious regions. In addressing such issues psychology was weak because for too long it was not “ecology-minded” (Oishi, 2014) and had overlooked the importance of opportunities and contexts and how they interact with individuals’ agency.

Being faced with uncertainties is an aversive experience (Westerhof & Keyes, 2006), and attempting to resolve the situation requires resources, cognitive and motivational, that may be challenged already by the uncertainties because they also signal a loss of resources, namely, the established ways of exercising control over one’s life. If the uncertainties related to social change people experience in their life refer to developmental tasks nobody can avoid, like undergoing educational training for a future occupation, they have to deal with the uncertainties and find a resolution.

Although uncertainties like those rooted in shattered career expectations are not the common stress-inducing distinct negative events such as unemployment, research demonstrated that feeling threatened or concerned that such events may happen have the same, and sometimes even stronger, effect on various indicators of well-being (Clark, 2003). We should bear in mind that well-being may also be an antecedent to further positive outcomes concerning social behavior, income, and health (De Neve, Diener, Tay, & Xuereb, 2014).

In sum, because social change is a ubiquitous fact of life, for better or for worse, and because it may have negative consequences for well-being and many other psychosocial outcomes, further research is needed that clarifies the interplay between personal and contextual conditions of successful coping with the changes. Beyond its relevance for new insights in the psychology of particular context–person interactions, this research is also likely to provide evidence relevant for policies addressing the big issues of social change in our societies.

SELECT RESULTS OF OUR RECENT RESEARCH ON SOCIAL CHANGE

Early research on the effects of postsocialist changes in Europe and Asia followed a design that compared samples gathered at different stages of the transformation process, meant to represent indirectly the changing conditions for individual behavior and development. The pivotal research was conducted by Kohn and his colleagues (Kohn, 2006). They found that the social change in countries of Eastern Europe gradually lead to positive associations, reminiscent of what was known from capitalist industrial organization, between the higher opportunity for self-directed work among employees higher in the hierarchy of production and higher levels of flexibility as personality characteristic. In our own past research, we used

a similar period comparison around the time of German unification and found that changes in social institutions regulating education, training, and work had an almost immediate effect on biographical transitions, such as the postponement of first occupational plans, which were now the responsibility of the individual instead of the state, resulting in practically equal timing in East and West (Silbereisen, Reitzle, & Juang, 2002).

Of course, such results did not apply to everybody because not everybody was affected to the same degree by new expectations and related uncertainties. This observation led us to pursue a different research strategy that put the new “demands” (the perception of growing uncertainties in major life domains) of social change as well as its benefits at the center, accompanied by concepts that address how people deal with the demands. We were not the first to address perceptions of social change. For instance, Kim (2008) assessed subjective appraisals of the extent, pace, and evaluation of negative change in various domains, such as politics or economy, in South Korea. It is important to note that in this study, instances of change referred to the society at large, not to the individual experience of change to the worse as in our case.

Our resulting “Jena Model of Social Change and Human Development,” developed within an interdisciplinary research consortium at the University of Jena, is shown in Figure 1. Inspired by the Elder–Conger tradition (Elder & Conger, 2000) in analyzing the effects of societal challenges on individual adaptation, we focused on the internal cognitive-motivational processing and its interaction with opportunities embedded in contexts affected by social change. The particular emphasis on the role of ecological conditions in such change is reminiscent of Greenfield’s (2009) concept of changes in community organization as driving change of social values and cognitive characteristics. Both models share a multilevel approach like the Jena Model.

Demands form the core of the model—self-perceived changes for the worst over a period of time (e.g., last 5 years) concerning work (labor market, work place, and career development), family (relationship stability, life’s direction, and ambivalence concerning family formation), and civic life (Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2009). The statements addressing demands like “It has become more difficult to plan my career path” or “The knowledge and experiences of my parents now provide less sense of direction in my life” are formulated such that they denote an aversive psychological state (Westerhof & Keyes, 2006) and loss of resources (Hobfoll, 2001) in domains that represent age-typical developmental tasks. The demands we assessed were conceived as individual manifestations of societal changes related to political transformation, globalization, and individualization, originally in mid-2000s Germany. We took rising rates of unemployment and nontraditional work contracts, growing rates of divorce and cohabitation, or increasing rates of

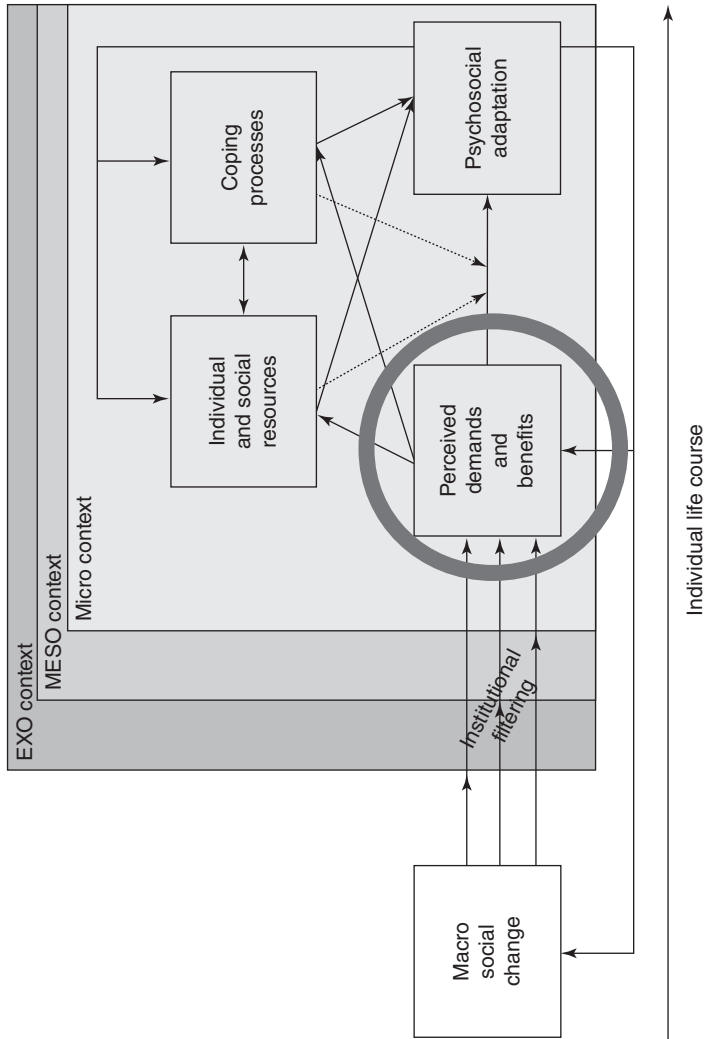


Figure 1 Jena model of social change and human development.

multicultural city environments, to mention a few examples, as objective evidence of such change (Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2009). A “filter” function (Hofaecker, Buchholz, & Blossfeld, 2010) is involved in the model whereby people with more resources, like those with a stable job, intact family, better education, or living in parts of the country that were less affected by social change are partially shielded from social change. A high load of demands is thought to overtax people’s capabilities and result in negative consequences for well-being.

As shown in the model, its entire working is moderated and mediated by the interplay between social and personal resources and a range of coping skills that are thought to be especially efficient if they are in line with perceived or actual opportunities for control of the situation. The entire system is also influenced by a number of distal and proximal contexts that are themselves targets of social change. To distinguish contexts, we often referred to units of administrative geographies people live in and assessed variation in opportunities.

To assess the generalizability of the model, a similar study was conducted in Poland, a country with similar societal changes but a weaker welfare net (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/>).

Research guided by the model yielded five major insights. First, we found that filtering indeed works as expected. What people experience as a result of change is a function of their resourcefulness based on various aspects of their status within the society—those better off are less burdened by demands (Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2009). In addition, demands themselves were found to be distributed unequally across geographic regions, reflecting objective challenges, such as unemployment rates.

Second, the presumed stressful nature of demands was confirmed by negative relationships with various indicators of well-being, like satisfaction with life in general and with particular domains of life such as work, as well as with positive emotions or through a positive relationship with depressive mood. The association was lower compared to analyzing distinct negative events, such as losing one’s job or getting divorced, but there was a consistent negative effect across domains of demands. It is likely that well-being also has an effect on demands, meaning that people who are not satisfied with their life may more easily face negative experiences concerning work and family. We investigated this possibility using longitudinal data and found that effects run both ways at about the same effect size. This means we are safe in assuming that demands function as expected and represent a risk for people’s well-being (Koerner, Silbereisen, & Cantner, 2014).

Third, as shown in the model, we deemed coping to be highly relevant as a way to dampen or aggravate the effects just described. Following the

approach of developmental regulation introduced by Heckhausen (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010), we distinguished between engagement and disengagement. Engagement means to be active in tackling aversive experiences directly, thereby rallying energy and motivation, and, in the case of failure, not giving up easily and instead trying again by other means to solve the problem. In contrast, we conceived disengagement as either looking for a face-saving excuse in case of failure, or giving up tackling the problem and leaving the field, possibly with the implication that energy and motivation may be saved for alternative actions.

Pursuing these questions lead us to a remarkable difference between the German and the Polish data (Tomasik, Silbereisen, Lechner, & Wasilewski, 2013). In both countries, modes of engagement were more prevalent compared to disengagement as expected, but the appraisals of the demands only played a role in the case of Germany. Here, the level of engagement was higher if the demands were appraised as challenge rather than threat, and as gain rather than loss. We interpreted the difference as related to the less generous welfare systems in Poland. Under such conditions one has to act, whatever the strength of the demand—for example, the fear of unemployment is not partially discounted by the feeling that one can still look for a better job.

We expected with Heckhausen (1999) that, with regard to protecting well-being, the effect of demands is smaller (less negative than on average) when high engagement and high sense of control come together, whereas the negative relationship is even aggravated when an incongruent combination applies. For disengagement, the same principle was confirmed (Gruemer, Silbereisen, & Heckhausen, 2013). Further results revealed that optimism (a tendency to tackle challenges with confidence and persistence; always expecting new opportunities; Carver & Scheier, 2002), apparently fostered engagement. More specifically, high optimism seems to steer people to take action when it's relatively easy and likely to be successful.

Fourth, other resources played an intriguing role. For exploration, a disposition to scrutinize contexts and embrace novelty for personal growth, we found for both Germany and Poland that people higher in exploration “reaped” the benefits of social change, such as new lifestyle options (It is now easier for me to live according to my own moral concepts.) and new learning opportunities (A greater range of further and continued educational offers are now available to me.) more than others (Lechner, Obschonka, & Silbereisen, 2015). This was especially so when living in regions characterized by a higher divorce rate and a higher rate of Internet domain registrations. Both contextual characteristics are seen as providing more opportunities, frames of reference, and behavioral models for societal trends toward individualization and knowledge society.

Religiosity constitutes another potential resource. Drawing on one's faith when confronted with challenges can provide social support, hope, solace, and comfort. We found that religiosity indeed seems to influence coping with demands of social change (Lechner *et al.*, 2015). Importantly, the relationship between religiosity and coping varied according to the regional economic prosperity: In more prosperous regions, religiosity was linked to higher engagement and lower disengagement. In less prosperous regions, by contrast, religiosity was linked to higher disengagement. We interpreted this as evidence that religiosity can serve different coping functions, promoting engagement or disengagement depending on the contextual opportunity structure. Beyond this, religiosity also buffered the effect of work-related demands on well-being but exacerbated the effect of family-related demands thereon (Lechner, Tomasik, Silbereisen, & Wasilewski, 2013).

Fifth, a final strand of research attempted to bring all elements of the Jena Model together in a multilevel format. Living in regions with high unemployment moderated the association of work demands and well-being, which is negative on average, such that it became less negative—if one is surrounded by unemployment, the demand posed by potential unemployment may not be seen as such a threat, and may thus undercut initiative. This effect was found to be well known from economic research, albeit for actual individual unemployment and not for concerns like our demands (Clark, 2003). Further, the effect of engagement in regions with high unemployment rates was less positive than on average (Pinquart, Silbereisen, & Koerner, 2009). Concerning disengagement, Tomasik, Silbereisen, and Heckhausen (2010) found that, where people lived in economically devastated regions, disengagement had a positive effect on well-being if they were hit hard by a high load of demands. The individuals concerned seem to take the stance that it is better to save their energy and motivation for other issues rather than engaging in a futile struggle. In other words, it is very possible that such groups are not acting in despair, but undertaking well-conceived action for the betterment of their situation.

A possible caveat should be mentioned and ruled out—all results thus far referred to “soft” outcomes, such as well-being, but not to “hard” facts, like whether or not opportunity-appropriate coping with demands has positive effects on the actual behaviors and outcomes in the fields to which the demands refer. This issue was resolved by Koerner, Lechner, Pavlova, and Silbereisen (2015) and findings show that engagement does buffer against risks in contexts. People living in regions characterized by higher unemployment rates faced a higher risk of losing their jobs, over time, and the downward income change was more severe if engagement was low.

POSSIBLE LINES OF FUTURE RESEARCH

For research and policy advice, the moderating role of ecological contexts and their change is an especially important insight. In our past research, we concentrated on two European countries characterized by the combination of postsocialist transformation and globalization. This is certainly just a fraction of the range of societal change with a strong political element taking place in the world over the last decades. There are other countries undergoing similar societal changes that deserve to be studied with uncertainties, coping, and contextual moderation at the core. China—a country undergoing rapid change to a capitalist economic system but without the representative democracy as we know it—is a case in point. In a study inspired by our demand approach, Chen, Bian, Xin, Wang, and Silbereisen (2010) found that parents of adolescents in big cities evaluate social change much more positively than those from the countryside. From other research, we also know that, like in postunification Germany, it took only a few years of reform to change apparently fundamental cultural arrangements, such as whether children in the classroom should speak out and show other “individualized” behaviors (Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005). Studying demands of social change in China with its huge regional differences would be a great undertaking for deepening the role of context moderation.

Countries that would serve especially well for the generalization of our German data are of course those divided as a consequence of political–military conflicts, such as Taiwan and China, or North and South Korea. As a matter of fact, the government of South Korea invited experts from the Jena group to give advice on how to prepare for possible political transition. Our presumption that uncertainties will be the crucial experience of people from the North, and that successful coping requires personal openness for exploration and sense of control, was crucial. Both attributes are not likely to be high, especially concerning behavior in public life, among the Northern population. This is a consequence of the severe economic hardships and political control experienced by that population, meaning that, particularly in the case of a political change, policy measures need to offer opportunities for engagement in individual agency (Nan & Lee, 2015).

By the results reported, we feel encouraged to suggest that the approach via demands and coping should be enriched and enlarged in future research. Thus far, we have concentrated on demands in work and family—no surprise given that the dominant features of today’s world of work and affected domains, at least in the Northern hemisphere, are uncertainty and precariousness (Kalleberg, 2009). However, data also exist concerning civic life, including demands of relevance concerning new migration to Europe, such as whether people feel threatened or challenged by the increasing indications

of multicultural society. Given the changes European societies are likely to undergo, systematic assessment of demands related to this situation may be urgent for future research. Each of the domains certainly has more features affected by social change than we investigated. One option for future research would be going into more details. Concerning the demands in the domain of work, Kubicek, Paškvan, and Korunka (2014) published an instrument to assess various aspects of demands, rooted in Rosa's (2013) "acceleration of life" model, distinguishing five different aspects. Similar procedures were followed for other domains such as family and public life.

Another option is to expand the approach to address and evaluate particular policy measures, such as the "active aging" policies in Europe (WHO, 2002). The aim is to foster more social participation and lifelong learning, improving health and fitness. Preliminary research by Pavlova and Silbereisen (2012) showed that such issues are perceived as uncertainties but especially so among those with lower education that perceive them as threat rather than challenge.

Future research should also pay attention to the fact that demands and benefits often come together because social change is multifaceted. The experience of being confronted with higher work intensity may be less negative in its effect, for instance, if it is complemented by a perceived increase in decision latitude at the workplace. Indeed Obschonka, Silbereisen, and Wasilewski (2012) showed that a combination of high/low demands and benefits exists in sizable shares of the samples studied in Germany and Poland, and that the groups characterized by high uncertainties and low benefits had low psychological resources and adjustment. People at risk of negative adjustment, such as the long-term unemployed, may be characterized as lacking the perceived complementing benefits of social change, but research is lacking.

Our approach concerning coping addressed probably rather stable habits for engagement and disengagement. Of course, there are more ways to characterize basic modes of how people deal with challenges. Nevertheless, the Heckhausen model has the advantage of offering a concept that refers to the regulation of major developmental tasks across the life span. The occasional positive role of disengagement is especially interesting because it does not conform to usual cultural expectations. A particularly intriguing variant is "projecting"—people invent a simple, clear, and consistent explanatory structure to challenges they see as threat, although the reality is much more complex (Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015). A case in point is how some rightist groups in Germany claim that recent immigrants exploit the welfare state to the disadvantages of the local population in need, and thereby try to overcome uncertainties induced by migration.

The quintessential result of research based on the Jena Model is certainly the demonstration of the various ways by which processes and effects on the individual level are moderated by features of the wider environment. By now, we have studied a range of economic features (rates of unemployment, net migration rate, and Internet domain registration rate), features related to the domain of family (divorce rate and family-friendly regional opportunities). Other context aspects of relevance would be differences in policies concerning state interventions in case of hardships, like the difference we found between Germany and Poland in welfare transfer payments that helped to explain differences in the association between demands and individuals' appraisals of the demands. It is known, for instance, that the relationship between level of education and work stress (reminiscent of our work demands) differs across European countries as a function of the country-specific combination of financial compensation when unemployed and further qualification (Lunau, Siegrist, Dragano, & Wahrendorf, 2015).

Nevertheless, more needs to be done in order to better understand how the linkages work. One way for future research would be to assess on a more proximal level manifestations of macro trends linked to the unemployment rate and other such measures of opportunity at the regional level, such as threatening signs in people's everyday environment (many buildings available for lease, closed shops and businesses, reduced public services, signs of neighborhood conflict, and vandalism). If our current interpretation is correct, one should be able to explain some of the broadscale regional effects we found by more proximal indicators in people's life, as has been done in sociological neighborhood studies (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002).

Not only Europe has been threatened by unprecedented youth unemployment rates in several countries, such as Portugal and Greece. Our finding that young people still in education and training are more positive concerning demands, but do not differ much in perceived (work) demand load compared to those in employment, gives hope because it shows realism and a positive outlook (Tomasik *et al.*, 2013). Against this backdrop, future research should investigate particular groups of young people, such as NEETs (not in employment, education, and training, which amount to 16% of the population in OECD countries) in more depth. Research should look at what demand load they experience in various domains, including the likely spillover between domains such as work and family. These young people will have their own experiences but also vicarious ones taken from peers and relatives. The cumulated threats of these experiences may have especially negative effects for well-being. What is especially relevant in the case of young people is the possibility of "scarring" effects of youth unemployment (or fear thereof, we may assume) on future adult unemployment (Schmillen

& Umkehrer, 2013). In addition, human and social costs are tremendous: identification with our democratic system is shaken, well-being is reduced, health status threatened, and future job satisfaction likely to be low (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011).

We concentrated on well-being as psychosocial outcome because it is crucial for development in practically all fields of life. There are other outcomes, however, with a more or less direct relationship to the demands and uncertainties we studied, such as civic engagement. It is obviously relevant for the cohesion in democratic societies, and there are concerns that, with the growing uncertainties associated with social change, the willingness to invest in working for a good cause in favor of others would decline. In preliminary research, we showed that this indeed may be the case (Pavlova & Silbereisen, 2012). The topic is important enough to be the subject of future research, especially concerning young people, who are often seen as not sufficiently interested in civic engagement for the good of society, or themselves.

Research on social change in the way we have suggested needs more longitudinal study because this would be the way for a better understanding of the bidirectional relationships between demands and psychosocial outcomes like well-being. Our own data are in part longitudinal, but the samples are not big enough to study the complex cross-level interactions we deem relevant as they evolve across time. However, to inform policy decisions randomized controlled intervention trials would also be crucial.

A line of relevant research on interventions exists, funded by the Horizon 2020 research initiative of the European Union. Beyond the urgent promotion of economic growth, labor market reforms, and a better alignment of school and vocational training, an increase in human and social capital is required to overcome the challenges young people face on the labor market (Banerji, Saksonovs, Lin, & Blavy, 2014). As the uncertainties we investigated appear to be an ordinary part of life for many, attempts at avoiding them will probably fail. After all they are also challenges that may help to grow. Consequently, it is important to promote capabilities for adequate coping and control beliefs, whereby adequate means to be able to perceive and exploit the opportunity structures in the environment.

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