First publ. in: Adversity and challenge in life in the new Germany and in England / John Bynner ... (eds.). Basingstoke: Macmillan Pr., 2000, pp. 87-122

Subjective experience of social change in individual development[1]

Gisela Trommsdorff

Until recently social change processes were usually studied at a macro level, focusing on social, political and economic phenomena such as changes in social institutions, political power, or economic disparities. However, such changes are not independent of individual behaviour (or vice versa). Therefore, the interrelations between social change and individual action need to be studied in more detail. Macro level changes cannot be explained by psychological theorizing, and individual behaviour cannot be explained by sociological theorizing; however, both perspectives can be fruitfully connected in order to understand possible interrelations between social change and individual behaviour. Here, such conceptual bridging will be explored by focusing on individual development in particular contexts.

Only in recent years have the effects of social change on individual development been discussed, relating, on the one hand, social (and historical) phenomena occurring on different levels, in different areas, with varying intensity and speed, and, on the other hand, individual developmental processes of persons of different cohorts and sex. Elder's (1974) famous study, *Children of the Great Depression*, has contributed impressively to the difficult question of connecting social and psychological theorizing. This study showed that social categories like cohort, sex and social status have to be transformed into psychological variables to enable us to understand the differential effects of social change on individual development. Furthermore, clarification is needed of the processes which transform social change into subjectively meaningful events (or sequences of events) which activate a person's behaviour.

This is related to a basic question for psychologists: whether and in which way objective life circumstances (economic status, level of education, material well-being and so on) and the changes in one's immediate life conditions (such as financial and social support) affect a person's behaviour and course of development. At least for a basic variable reflecting psychological health – psychological well-being – empirical research indicates that the effects of socio-demographic variables are small; most people in all groups feel quite happy. (For a summary, see Suh, Diener and Fujita, 1996). Does this also apply to the experience of social change? Previous research on stress, coping, and well-being has shown that individuals exhibit very different cognitive and emotional reactions to seemingly similar events (cf. Folkman and Lazarus, 1991). If this also applies to the experience of social change, how can such differences be explained? What are the psychological processes whereby persons negotiate social change?

There are several problems to be dealt with when the effects of social change on individual lives are studied. First, the concepts, social change and individual development, and their relationship are discussed in the introductory section. In the second and third sections, we shall deal with theoretically relevant factors which may filter the effects of social change on the subjective experience of change and on the individual negotiation of change. In the fourth section, some studies on psychological aspects of social change in East Germany are discussed.

Social change and individual development

Social change usually consists of a multitude of interrelated events which occur at different points of time, with different speed, strength and effects in different levels of a society. Usually there is no single event which can be regarded as a sufficient indicator of a change; certain events (such as changes in a society's constitution) are usually connected to other changes which either support or hinder the effectiveness and speed of any repercussions; for example, other changes in women's rights may be, but not necessarily, related to the legal status of abortion.

Also, the onset of social change does not necessarily affect people directly. All changes have latent and manifest consequences, and their effects on individuals can be rather indirect. They can be moderated and mediated by institutions and contexts, for example, the political

system; changes affecting immediate contexts, which are more directly related to the person's everyday life, can be increased or buffered by 'proximal' contexts of workplace or family. Furthermore, the effects of social change are dynamic and interrelated over time; certain effects may increase, or decrease, or compensate for each other, or have a joint accumulative effect on a person's distant or immediate context. Accordingly, the effects of a social change may differ in their impact on people's beliefs and behaviour.

Why do certain social changes affect people differently? Are certain people more affected by changes on the macro level because they are more sensitive to social change? Changes at the level of market systems have multiple implications for activating, frustrating, and satisfying individual needs. Changes in individual behaviour can be induced, for example, by the internationalization of consumer behaviour (travelling, fashions, leisure etc.). However, a person need not be aware of such new behavioural options deriving from global changes. The implications of changes at the level of international economic relations can be merely perceived as theoretical scenarios, which may or may not affect meanings and induce action. Therefore, not all members of a population will experience the effects of a social change at the same time, to the same degree, with respect to the same aspects, or in the same way. Even in times of fundamental socio-economic change (e.g., changes in the world economy, and internationalization of the market system during globalization), only certain people will actually experience such macro level changes as events which affect their individual lives. Even when people are objectively affected by certain changes, they need not necessarily be aware of the changes, or of any changes in their own beliefs and behaviour.

Individual development is understood here as a life-long process which is actively negotiated in changing environments (Lerner, 1986). Starting from a contextual approach to individual development (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Silbereisen, Eyfert and Rudinger, 1986), certain interrelations between individual behaviour and characteristics of the context are assumed. Development is based on changes and stabilities; thus, individuals may expect more or less predictable ways of interaction with their environments. Individual development implies that the person acts in changing ecological contexts in ways which are related to changing developmental demands and outcomes. Therefore, the experience of change is one aspect of a person's life-long experience.

While people experience contextual changes throughout their lives, these changes need not be related to social change. Thus, people may experience contextual changes as 'normal' events during life-long development. It therefore seems useful to differentiate between life events in developmental transitions (e.g., entering school or work), and certain life events which occur as consequences of social change and which constitute non-normative events ('exogenous shocks') disrupting the person's established way of thinking and behaviour. Though both normative and non-normative events constitute objective changes, it is questionable whether they also induce a *subjective experience* of change. The quality of such experience, and people's ways of *negotiating* such changes are likely to differ.

Obviously, certain changes in a person's social, economic and political environment may cause significant changes in an individual's behaviour and their evaluation of the self in relation to the environment, including their life goals, future outlook, and control orientation. Therefore new interaction processes between a person and his/her environment may occur while he/she acts on and is affected by social change.

In times of social change certain unpredictable contextual changes in the proximal environment may occur, and induce problems that can be solved only by changing previously established behaviour patterns. This may be the case when a person undergoes normal transitions in his/her biography (e.g. having children), and at the same time experiences drastic changes in his/her proximal environment on account of social change (e.g., economic hardship, changes in the demands of the labour market, increased unemployment). The accumulation of contextual changes may induce uncertainty due to lack of experience of how to cope with such changes.

It therefore seems necessary, first of all, to study the conditions which affect the *perception* and *subjective experience of change*. An awareness of change could be induced, for example, by the disruption of well-established person-environment relations such as an increased or reduced socio-emotional and physical availability of attachment figures. Social systems on the micro level, the family for instance, can mediate the meaning and effects of socio-economic changes. Attachment figures may transmit a certain meaning of ongoing changes in such a way that the control beliefs of children are reduced or stabilized. How the changes in a person's context are perceived and evaluated by relevant others may affect the way the person experiences the social changes (see Figure 4.1).

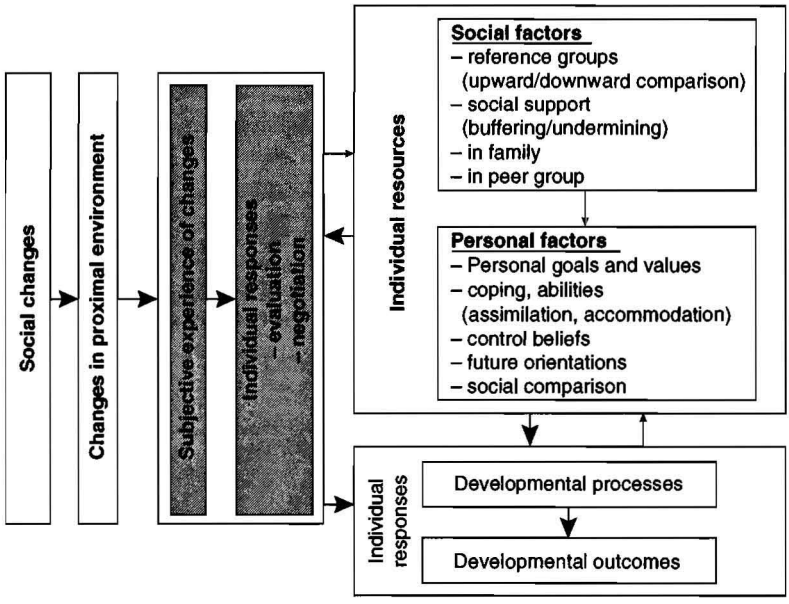


Figure 4.1 Subjective experience of social change and individual development

Individual differences in the subjective experience of social change: socio-psychological factors influencing the subjective meaning of social change

When dealing with the subjective meaning of social change and socio-psychological processes which affect these meanings, data on the aggregate level can only provide general information and assist in formulating hypotheses about individual processes. In the following, we will discuss some theoretical aspects of how social change is experienced and handled by the individual, thus turning from studies on the broad effects of social change to studies of *intervening psychological processes* which may account for inter-individual differences in the experience of change.

Individual differences in the experience of change

Social change can affect different persons in different ways. For instance, late adolescence is a critical time for forming one's identity and for commitment to values and ideologies. Therefore, historically significant

changes experienced during this period should affect the identity of adolescents from the same cohort in a similar way. According to Mannheim (1928/1952), the combined effects of the circumstances of the historical moment in which a cohort enters adolescence, the shared socialization and the specific demographic characteristics of the cohort, build up a potential for dealing with social change. However, this does not preclude individual differences. Certain subgroups of a particular cohort may deal with life events in different ways depending, for example, on their specific socialization experiences and related social and personal resources. The impact of social change on people at different stages in the life course is likely to be related to the kind, the strength, and also the sequential processes of such social changes. For example, during times of economic recession, unskilled workers may be the first to be affected, followed by female workers, adolescents, then highly skilled personnel. For other kinds of social change such sequential processes of impact may follow different routes. For example, in the transformation of East Germany, and even more so, in Eastern Europe, the political elite was hit first; however, this group then had a good chance to recover first from the upheaval by using experience and well-established networks for effective coping strategies.

An important variable is the period of change, and how in their individual and family lives, people experience particular effects (Trommsdorff, 1994b; 1998a). How these events are dealt with will presumably have consequences for subsequent development. The following differentiations are therefore necessary:

(a) *different people* (e.g., different cohorts; people from different educational backgrounds) will experience social change in different ways, depending on their past and present experiences and their related resources;

(b) at *different stages of individual development* in the life course, any changes will be experienced differently, depending on the particular stage of life a person has reached (developmental age), and on their life history up to that date, including the development of their roles, statuses and resources;

(c) at *different points in a process of social change*, different social groups and individuals can be affected differently (period effects). All these factors will contribute to differential subjective experiences of social change. Therefore, combined cross-sectional and sequential

studies of individual development in relation to the experience of a given change are necessary.

Future research thus needs to study subjective experience of social change as part of the specific developmental process, based on interactions between the social context and intra-individual factors. This may permit predictions of whether, and how far, social change imparts risks or challenges, and what the developmental outcomes (including coping) are like.

Social influences on individual differences

It is assumed here that individual differences in the experience of social change depend on the person's goals and belief systems and on the reference group he/she adheres to. Individual goals and values, and the relevance of a certain reference person or group, are not independent of each other (as in model learning). A reference person or group fulfills several functions in a person's development (for example, identity formation) and for their everyday activities (orientation; evaluation). Here, processes of comparison play an important role. Especially in situations of increased imbalance between past and present experiences, reference groups gain more importance. This should especially be the case in times of social change (see Figure 4.1).

Social comparison and reference groups

Depending on their subjective evaluations of different aspects of life quality, people will experience different levels of overall satisfaction. Public opinion polls demonstrate a decrease in satisfaction among East Germans during the years since reunification. Subjective well-being and satisfaction were much higher immediately after the collapse of the former GDR than currently. Even though the objective situation with respect to democracy, freedom and mobility has dramatically improved, other aspects of life quality have deteriorated. These include general job security and women's chances in the job market. May such changes in life satisfaction depend on changes in the environment and on the indicators selected for comparison?

Subjective evaluations of the effects of social changes depend on the goal structures (and value systems) of individuals; these affect the relevance to the person of any aspects of social change and also the person's baselines for comparison. There are two bases for anchoring comparisons: intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences in the past, and expectations for the future (and their interrelations). The interpersonal

level embraces the individual's own position and the position of their reference group with respect to a given social context. The intrapersonal level includes evaluations of past, present and future experiences. The subjective meaning of social change, with respect to goal attainment and related subjective well-being, for example, comprises multiple components and criteria for evaluation that depend on processes of comparison.

The effects of social change become psychologically relevant only when the environment acquires a new subjective meaning. This meaning may be modified and mediated by relevant others – the family, friends or other reference groups (political party) – and used for comparisons (see Figure 4.1). One aspect of the subjective meaning of social change is the person's satisfaction with respect to goal attainment and need fulfillment; this may affect the person's subjective well-being. The reference group gives a certain meaning to social change providing an anchor for evaluating present conditions with respect to personal goal attainment.

When most of a population is affected by change, the individual can more easily compare his/her situation with that of other group members. In the case of negative changes, as in times of economic depression, when other people also suffer from economic decline, the individual does not feel alone. This helps people to feel not responsible for the economic hardship of their families; attributions of its causes to other factors serve to preserve self-esteem which is an important factor in coping. Thus besides providing criteria for the evaluation of social change, the reference group has additional functions. The reference group can provide socio-emotional support and self-concept enhancing effects.

However, a reference group does not necessarily provide resources for coping. Coping is more difficult when the comparison results in perceiving oneself as a loser while neighbours and friends are perceived as winners. Also, the reference group may affect attribution processes and related control beliefs in a negative way, as when the belief is supported that nobody acting alone or with others can control the present economic situation. In this case, relinquished control and anomie exemplify the derogating effects of reference groups. When the entire reference group loses out from social change, identification with this group can hurt self-esteem. Identification with a highly devalued reference group may increase stress, while identification with a highly valued reference group may serve as buffering factor when coping with social change.

Social support

As we have seen, reference groups mediate the effects on the subjective experience of social change, thus contributing to individual differences in response to it. In this section the focus is on social support and its psychological effects on the experience of change. Individual differences are explained here by the availability and psychological function of social support.

In times of social change, particularly when critical life events accumulate, perceived and/or experienced social support become all the more relevant. The protective effects of social support among adults can be demonstrated with variables such as the size of social networks. The psychological function of social support is related to emotional, instrumental and affirmative support (Wills, Mariani and Filer, 1996). For example, emotional support enhances a person's well-being and coping ability in stressful situations. Awareness of being part of a social group and being cared for by members of this group has considerable importance for people undergoing stressful events. Instrumental and affirmative support – perceived help for dealing with problems – is especially relevant for persons who lack the personal experience and knowledge to deal with stressful events.

Social support and social undermining. A significant mediating factor predicting whether a person will cope with social change and related critical life events is the quality of social interactions. Certain social interactions can provide emotional, instrumental and self-support, whereas others can be detrimental and have adverse effects. While social support serves as a buffering factor in coping with critical life events, social undermining is a risk factor which can build up stress and frustration (see Figure 4.1). The positive psychological functions of social support do not, however, depend on the size of social networks or the existence of (multiple) interpersonal relations alone; the types of peers and the quality of interactions are also crucial. It should be noted that taking into account only 'objective' social resources and disregarding 'subjectively' perceived support can lead to false conclusions.

Social support in the family. For example, it is necessary to take into account whether males and females differ in the quality of support perceived from their marital partners (Brunstein, Dangelmayer and Schultheiss, 1996). Whether a critical life event such as economic hardship really affects a person negatively, can depend on the quality of their intimate social relations. These, in turn, can be affected by economic

hardship through mediating chains of events such as the subjective experience of financial strain and related increase of hostile family interaction (Conger et al., 1990). Early research on the 'great depression' showed that one person's unemployment can affect the entire family (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel, 1972).

Stressful life events, such as unemployment, can affect the mental health of the person negatively and may extend beyond the unemployed person, driving other critical life events. Growing frustration among the unemployed may give rise to destructive interaction patterns, increased marital dissatisfaction and conflict among family members. The effects of the associated financial strain can generate a spiralling negative interaction process and dysfunctional exchanges (social undermining) between partners (or family members) which increase symptoms of depression and may lead to further conflict and eventual separation. In contrast, the emotional and instrumental quality of experienced social support contributes to coping with stress.

Following this line of reasoning, the perceived withdrawal of supportive behaviour can be a further (independent) contributor to the stress caused by economic hardship and socio-economic change. Conger et al. (1990) have tested these hypotheses in a cross-sectional study of samples in rural communities, where males were usually the employed breadwinners. Vinokur, Price and Caplan (1996) extended the generality of the process model using longitudinal data on urban samples with recently unemployed wives and husbands. These authors demonstrate that people experiencing recent unemployment also tend to experience increased depression and decreased relationship satisfaction as a function of financial strain; the same persons also experience less social support and more social undermining (as assessed by both partners).

Using the same line of reasoning for children and adolescents, the family and peer group may both be a source of further stress or a social resource which can be utilized to deal with stress. Especially in a situation where the whole family experiences critical life events such as experiencing economic hardship, emotional support from other family members may contribute to the improvement of social and personal resources.

The positive function of supportive parents has been shown for adolescents at risk (Wills, 1991). For example, affiliation with peers who reject mainstream values turns out to be a risk factor for adolescents (Jessor and Jessor, 1977). However, parental support can protect adolescents from affiliation with deviant peers. Stress-buffering effects of

emotional support from parents reduce the often demonstrated relationship between negative life events and adverse effects for adolescents. Moreover, Wills and Cleary (1996) have demonstrated in a large and representative sample of adolescents (from early to middle adolescence) that substance use was inversely related to parental support. High support increased the impact of protective factors like behavioural coping; it also reduced the impact of negative events, and moderated the effects of risk factors.

Parental support as a protector will be based on the particular parent–child relationship which operates as a mediating factor. The psychological processes involved in parent–child relations allow for a better understanding of the resilience of certain children, and how the buffering effects against problem behaviour operate. Parent–child relationships cover multiple types of support, the monitoring of a child's behaviour, companionship with the child, providing warmth and emotional support. These help strengthen secure attachment relations between parent and child. Furthermore, parents can demonstrate effective task-oriented problem-solving and serve as models for effective coping.

Empirical evidence shows that a close and supportive parent–child relationship strengthens a positive self-concept by providing secure attachment, including a certain 'inner working model' comprising a positive view of oneself and one's relation to the wider social world (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Persons who conceive others as friendly are less likely to attribute hostile intentions and react aggressively (Kornadt, 1982). A positive and trusting 'inner working model' should prevent an adolescent engaging in conflicting interactions. Rather it predisposes him or her to establish rewarding intimate relations which provide further protective social support. Close parent–child relationships increase the effectiveness of socialization through the child's acceptance and internalization of the parents' values. These help prevent the child affiliating with deviant groups. Furthermore, a close parent–child relationship encourages the development of better skills for self-regulation and emotional control in stressful situations (Friedlmeier and Trommsdorff, 1997). A close parent–child relationship promotes abilities for coping with stressful events, and for developing resistance to problem behaviour.

In cases of social change inducing stressful life events for family members (eg unemployment), parents' effective coping can be achieved while supportive communication among family members is maintained. This gives a child the chance to observe empathy, co-operation, and

problem-solving behaviour in the family in this critical period. Parental warmth and problem-solving presumably serve as a model for the child's effective coping with negative life events, and contribute to the transmission of protective factors for children in times of social change.

Personal factors in experiencing change and coping with stress: personal goals, future orientation and control beliefs in times of social change

So far we have discussed how social factors mediate and moderate the effects of social change. In the following, we will deal with the way the individual experiences and acts upon the effects of social change. This will lead us to ask which personal factors are most relevant and how they function in the process of experiencing change.

From a motivation theory point of view, people's actions are structured around their dominant goals which make up the core of their identities. Such goals ('current concerns', 'personal projects') represent what people want to achieve or wish to become. In periods of social change, such goals, and also ways of achieving these goals, may be affected. This will affect the way social change is experienced psychologically. From a motivation theory point of view, one can assume that experience of frustration in achieving important goals will induce negative emotions and activate psychological processes. These impel individuals to find ways of overcoming such imbalances in person–environment relations. They engage in problem-solving and coping behaviour in order to achieve the goals or to search for new goals. In the case of subjectively experienced changes as barriers to goal achievement, evaluations of alternative goals and ways of achieving them can be expected. This may encourage active pursuit of these new goals or ruminations about lost opportunities. Depending on the experience of the effects of social change and on the available social and personal resources for coping (for example, family support, attribution of causes of events, control beliefs, self-esteem) individual responses to change will differ (see Figure 4.1).

Therefore, it has to be clarified whether a social change is perceived by the individual as an event affecting his or her goals and ways of achieving them. This motivation theory approach differentiates between the negative and positive experience of social change. Social change can be subjectively experienced as improvement or as a threat to achieving personal goals. Accordingly, social changes (or changes in the economic system) will have different effects on individual behaviour.

Control beliefs and coping. When social change affects the pursuit and realization of personal goals, a belief in self-efficacy to regulate any discrepancy between personal goals and the given situation may be activated. When the goal-directed behaviour arising from previous plans is affected by social change, goals, plans, and parts of the goal-directed behaviour are likely to be reorganized in certain ways (see Figure 4.1). Carver and Scheier (1990) assume that goal disruptions induce a state of self-focused attention in which the person compares their present state with their personal goals. When these do not fit, they engage in one of two different forms of coping: one of these is to try again to achieve the goals (assimilative control), the other is to change the importance of the goal or to redirect the focus of attention (accommodative control).

Several theoretical approaches including theories of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1968), and theories of habituation (Suh, Diener and Fujita, 1996) provide hypotheses to explain accommodation. For example, from studies of habituation we know that the psychological effects of negative (and also positive) life events may eventually wear off. From longitudinal studies Suh, Diener and Fujita (1996) demonstrate that the psychological effects of life events on subjective well-being diminish once adaptation takes place. Another interesting finding from this study is that good and bad events tend to occur together rather than apart within an individual lifecourse. Also, theories of self-enhancement provide examples of how accommodation processes are activated. A cognitive interpretation of the self and the environment in a self-supportive way improves adaptation to, and coping with, objectively negative life circumstances.

Processes of accommodation and assimilation reduce the negative feelings arising from goal disruption; if such processes are not successfully activated, self-focused attention and negative affect may increase or reduce the individual's positive self-concept. The question remains as to whether assimilative or accommodative control is more successful for coping. For a long time, primary (assimilative) control (changing one's environment according to one's own goals) was seen as being more useful than secondary (accommodative) control, (changing one's goals according to expectations of the environment) (cf. states of coping: Flammer, 1990). However, recent cross-cultural studies have demonstrated that no single model of coping can be applied in cultures where different values for primary or secondary control exist (Weisz, Rothbaum and Blackburn, 1984; Essau and Trommsdorff, 1996; Trommsdorff and Essau, 1998).

Furthermore, recent studies of control orientation demonstrate that successful coping depends on a certain balance between primary and secondary control orientation which again is affected by the cultural context and related values. In a culture where secondary control (changing one's own goals according to expectations of the context) is dominant, this strategy will be more useful than primary control (changing one's context according to one's goals), and vice versa (Seginer, Trommsdorff and Essau, 1993).

In addition, studies of control orientation over the life-span indicate that, depending on the stage reached, primary or secondary control strategies change in their functional effectiveness for coping. Although at a younger age primary control may be more adequate, at an older age, the functional value of secondary control may increase (Heckhausen and Schulz, 1995). The self-regulatory function of psychological control is used by children in ways different from those adopted by adults when confronted by stressful events. Lopez and Little (1996) reported more personal and control expectancy beliefs, more activation of various coping strategies, and more primary control among younger children (about age 8) compared with older children (about 11 years). These results are in line with the findings of Band and Weisz (1988) who found that younger children prefer primary control coping strategies more than older children do. Secondary control strategies increase during middle childhood. These results are consistent with the results from our own studies of self-regulation, control beliefs and the future orientations of children in middle and late childhood (Trommsdorff et al., 1978). In these studies it was shown that young children's unrealistic internal attribution of control is reduced when approaching adolescence; this is when self-regulating behaviour increases.

Future orientation and coping. Social change may bring about changes in concrete 'current concerns' arising from changes in perceived opportunities and social expectations. Such changes can eventually affect the direction and content of more general personal goals, projects and life tasks. In cases where such goals have become part of the person's future orientation (Nuttin, 1984; Trommsdorff, 1984; 1994c) and their self-identity changes, a new developmental task has to be achieved (see Figure 4.1).

From a motivation theory perspective, personal goals and related control beliefs, and future orientations, predict people's behaviour (Heckhausen and Schulz, 1995; Trommsdorff, 1986; 1994a; 1994c). Conceiving a person's future orientation as including a structured

system of personal goals, which individuals hope to achieve in the near or distant future (Trommsdorff, 1986; 1994c), the study of future orientation in times of social change can give insights into the impact of such changes on individual development. An optimistic future orientation, strong goal-commitment and favourable situational conditions for attaining personal goals allow for successful goal achievement, personal satisfaction and well-being. Brunstein (1993) was able to demonstrate that optimistic expectations of goal attainability, belief in outcome control, and the experience of social support increased the likelihood of goal attainment and personal satisfaction. According to Scheier and Carver (1992), pessimistic persons have more difficulties in coping with problems because of their lower expectations of future success, while persons with optimistic attitudes and a belief in control are better able to cope with stressful life events. Bandura's (1994) studies of self-efficacy and the related belief in control are in line with this thesis. Strong belief in self-efficacy is conceived of as a functional precondition for successful adaptation to changes in the personal environment.

However, recent studies point out that simple relations between optimism and coping do not hold. First, we should differentiate between strategies for coping. So far, the coping literature has identified two groups of strategies: activities aiming at self-improvement or preparation for certain events, and activities aimed at the regulation of emotions (Folkman and Lazarus, 1991). Effective coping is reduced by insufficient regulation of negative effects, and is enhanced by problem-solving. Coping activities which aim at self-improvement make use of mental simulations such as downward social comparisons or defensive pessimism. Downward social comparison can function as a self-enhancing strategy because we compare ourselves to others who are worse off. Coping with negative life events can be successful in the case of a downward focus ('others suffer more than I do') (Wills, 1981). In contrast, upward comparisons may induce dissatisfaction and feelings of deprivation, especially when people perceive their failure and misfortune as unjustified and difficult to change. On the other hand, upward social comparisons (comparisons with others who are better off) can provide the best information for self-betterment (Taylor and Lobel, 1989). Thus, the same behaviour can have two different functions.

Second, we need to differentiate between the various functional aspects of pessimism and optimism. Functions similar to those for coping strategies can be observed in the mental simulation of future events. Such anticipations can be based on optimistic or pessimistic

attitudes. However, both optimistic and pessimistic expectations may have a self-serving function: defensive pessimists would prefer a negative view of the future while optimists would prefer positive expectations. For both the defensive pessimist and the optimist, the underlying strategy is highly functional for problem-solving. Defensive pessimists and optimists display different but potentially equal functional responses, in attempting to cope with negative life events (Cantor and Norem, 1989). One of the major ways in which both may vary is in their use of anticipatory vs. retrospective coping strategies in order to protect self-esteem. Defensive pessimists may use anticipatory thinking-through strategies and set low expectations before action; optimists may use retrospective strategies and restructure their performances (Seginer, 1997). Mental simulations such as social comparison, and anticipatory vs. retrospective evaluation of performance, allow for self-improvement and affect regulation – two important activities in coping. Thus a singular view of the relations between an optimistic versus pessimistic future orientation and coping can lead only to inconsistent results. It is necessary to distinguish 'true' pessimists from 'defensive' pessimists and from optimists. Defensive pessimists may be more ready than optimists to delay gratification by experiencing a short-term negative effect in order to solve an upcoming problem more efficiently. It may be useful to study not only the direction (and context) but also the timing of people's mental simulations. Especially in times of social change, a complex dynamic sequence of changing events over a long period of time is to be expected. In this case, starting one's mental simulation too early (before the stressful events really become manifest) may render coping procedures less effective.

To summarize, personal goals and values, and mental simulations (with respect to social comparisons, evaluating the past and future and personal control) can serve as important personal resources for coping with stressful life events in times of social change (cf. Figure 4.1). Upward and downward social comparisons, optimistic and pessimistic individual expectations, and primary and secondary control beliefs can be combined to optimize coping. Since ability and preference for the direction and timing of such mental simulation differ between people, individual differences with respect to responses to social change can be expected.

Psychological aspects of social change in East Germany

In this section, empirical studies on the subjective experience of social change in East Germany and some implications for individual develop-

ment are discussed in relation to the theoretical frame of reference just outlined. The methodological shortcomings of the empirical data do not yet allow a systematic testing of the theoretical propositions. However, empirical studies of the processes of transformation in East Germany can help in the formulation of some hypotheses about the effects of social change on individual behaviour and development.

The transformation has been seen as a challenge for some people and as a risk for others; accordingly, changes after it may have produced losers and winners. It is assumed here that whether, and in which way, social change influences individual lives depends, on the one hand, on the way the person experiences certain aspects of the change, and, on the other hand, how the person negotiates and deals with changing contexts. How can the subjective experience and psychological effects of social change on individual development be studied? First, some methodological problems have to be taken into account (cf. Trommsdorff, in press-b).

Methodological issues

In order to measure the effects of specific social changes, 'natural experiments' are useful. They avoid some problems of the confounding effects of ongoing contextual processes. The transformation of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) has sometimes been regarded as a 'natural experiment', because a complete restructuring of all social, political and economic institutions took place after the former GDR broke down and they were taken over by the West German system. Therefore, comparative studies on East German people before and after the unification should be valuable in measuring the effects of social change. Can the East German transformation really serve as a quasi natural experiment to measure the effects of social change on individual development?

The methodological requirements are not really fulfilled. The first constraint is the incomplete data set on individual beliefs and behaviour before unification. In order to measure its effects, it would be necessary to have data on hand from the time of the old GDR, and to follow up the same people over time, during the process of transformation, and during their development.

Such studies, however, are rare. First, few data exist from the time of the former GDR that can be used as baseline for comparison. This is due to restrictions on polling for political reasons in the former GDR. Furthermore, it is difficult to identify samples for which repeated measures (on the same persons) have been carried out. Some of the

longitudinal studies which have been started only after unification may fulfil the conditions of an 'after-only' design, but they cannot give information on the really striking effects because of the lack of an adequate control group. One could argue that West Germans provide an adequate control group: both East and West Germany shared the same cultural and historical background until the end of the Second World War. Then the governments in East and West Germany went in antagonistic directions and their populations were socialized in very different contexts. Therefore, the effects of these different socialization experiences have to be taken into account when using West Germans as a control group.

In order to measure the subjective effects of social change, public opinion polls are often used. It is usually difficult to decide whether such information on attitudes can be interpreted as the effects of social change or as depending on other factors, education or media, for example. Also, it is unclear whether public opinion polls taken at different points of time can measure the stability or change in individual attitudes. Only repeated measures of the same people over a period of time are useful for this purpose (panel). However, panel studies produce only data on the aggregate level. Their designs are not necessarily appropriate to measure the effects of social changes on individual beliefs. Consequently, they usually do not tell us which aspects of a social change were influential, and under what conditions in the individual life course these influences occurred. Also, most of the panel studies since unification yield little data on psychological variables regarding individual development. Only some of them give information on stabilities and changes in the attitudes in East and West Germany which are needed to derive hypotheses on the possible effects of socio-political change on psychological variables.

East Germans' perception and evaluation of change after the unification

Let us first turn to the question whether social change as such has been acknowledged by East German people, and how such changes were evaluated and experienced.

Studies by Zapf and Habich (1995) demonstrate that during the first years after reunification East Germans perceived their situation as having improved significantly, while the majority of West Germans perceived their situation as unchanged. Also, West Germans reported significantly less change compared with East Germans as measured by the number of life events which were mentioned as having occurred in

recent years. These changes were usually evaluated by East and West Germans as positive rather than negative. East Germans reported more positive and also more negative events. Later on, however, it seems that East Germans evaluated their situation differently. A generalized experience of dissatisfaction and reduced sense of control can be observed after a short period of happiness. Opinion polls show that responsibility was attributed by East Germans to external powers (such as the state or government) to a significantly higher degree than by West Germans (61 vs. 32 per cent). The individual person was seen as less responsible (39 vs. 68 per cent) (Zapf and Habich, 1995). Moreover, trust in (present) public institutions was significantly lower in East Germany compared with West Germany (Gensicke, 1996). In line with these data, political participation (for example, political involvement and political influence) was less highly valued by East Germans compared with West Germans.

Ongoing social changes may have affected people's anchors for social comparisons. Changes in the anchor may induce changes in the experience of social change. The loss of one's reference group may accentuate the negative effects of social change. In East Germany active work groups (brigades) and other social organizations (*Junge Pioniere*, for example), which served as reference groups and social resources in the former GDR, disappeared after reunification. Several studies point to the negative effects of losing these social resources (e.g. Zinnecker and Silbereisen, 1996; Trommsdorff and Chakkarath, 1996; Trommsdorff, in press-a). Therefore, a need to find substitutes for such reference groups, in order to gain cognitive and emotional support, should have developed. However, the West German system so far has not yet become a system with which large numbers of East Germans can identify. This may be another reason for individuals to search for familiar groups for identification. For example, the former socialist party which has transformed itself into the so-called PDS (Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus – Party of Democratic Socialists) has gained increasing acceptance (cf. Trommsdorff, 1994b).

Depending on the evaluations, and the related comparison processes, which different people carry out in different ways (comparisons of present with past situation; comparisons between present situation and expected future situation; comparison between East and West Germans), the outcomes should be different. The results should differ between people from different age groups, gender, and educational status. In other words, individual differences in evaluations of social change must be taken into account.

The subjective experience of social change is affected by cohort, age and gender. A striking example of these effects is the results of the study by Roether and Kunze (1995) on male and female older people in East and West Germany (mean age: 77 years). This study demonstrated not only that certain older people in East Germany were better off than their same-aged peers in West Germany but also that they were more likely to experience their age positively and as less of a burden. The experience of old age was more positive for old women from East as compared to West Germany. This also held for the experience of past events; while East and West German women did not differ with respect to reporting past negative events, East German older women remembered more positive events than West German women. Also, East German women reported more consistency between their expectations and life experiences with respect to work and family. The East German women were less depressed than the West German women and they seemed better equipped to deal with old age. Ongoing social changes did not affect East German older women negatively. On the contrary, as compared with West German women, East German older women seem to have profited from the changes after reunification, and also from their past experience, when they had to deal with ongoing changes in the former GDR.

The subjective experience of objective changes may induce an accentuation of previously held values. One of the most dramatic aspects of objective socio-economic change in East Germany included economic unification and the breakdown of state-supported job security and the state-regulated labour market. Therefore, growing unemployment should have affected the well-being, and work-related goals and values of East Germans. Several opinion polls have shown that East and West Germans differ in work-related value orientations. For example, East Germans held the more achievement-oriented childrearing goals and showed a higher preference for family and work values (cf. Gensicke, 1996; Meulemann, 1996). These differences in value orientations seem to be related to socialization conditions before unification; they have not changed since it took place. Past socialization and present insecurity in the labour market may both have reinforced or stabilized the importance of work values in East Germany. The experience of change in the labour market presumably has reinforced work values. As a matter of fact, while the overall subjective well-being declined for East Germans, the subjectively perceived importance of work for subjective well-being remained quite stable and was higher than for West Germans after unification (SOEP, 1995).

Further reanalyses of data from the German Socio-Economic Panel show that the relevance of family, work and leisure for overall satisfaction differed significantly between East and West Germans, and also between males and females and between different cohorts. East German females (in all age groups) had a stronger work orientation than West German females. Their life satisfaction was to a stronger degree affected by work rather than by leisure and informal social relations. In contrast, for West German males and females, work, as compared to leisure, was less important than for East German males and females, especially for people between 30 and 60 years old. We shall have to study over a longer period whether, and in which way, inconsistencies between high work values on the one hand, and low job opportunities in the labour market on the other hand, will eventually affect the value orientations and behaviour of East Germans.

The subjective experience of social change is mediated by the family. The family as a private niche which provides security was an important social resource in a socio-political context of restricted individual freedom in the former GDR. Possibly, basic functions of the family (such as providing emotional support) have gained even more importance in times of radical socio-economic change (Trommsdorff and Chakkarath, 1996). For East German people, the positive effect of perceived socio-emotional support has been shown in the 'Rostock study'. East Germans experienced socio-emotional support during the former GDR from their families and work groups. However, after reunification both microsystems lost some of their functional quality. The work teams were disrupted by the restricted job market; and many families suffered through economic insecurity. Data from the longitudinal study of adolescents and young adults in Rostock (Reis, 1993) demonstrated that the need for emotional support gained in importance after reunification while its quality decreased.

Future research will have to show whether families in East Germany will provide social support in cases of a conflict of values between the younger and older generation. For the younger East German generation, a shift towards 'postmodern' (individualistic and hedonistic) value orientations can be observed (Gensicke, 1996; Schnabel, Baumert and Roeder, 1994). These 'postmodern' value orientations have been visible among East German adolescents since the 1980s when significant value changes occurred in the former GDR (Friedrich and Griese, 1991). Therefore, it may not be surprising that East German adolescents were more susceptible than their parents to the 'postmodern',

hedonistic values promoted since reunification. Whether, and how far, such different goals and values may induce a generation conflict in East Germany and reduce the quality of social support from the family is an important topic for future study.

Individual differences in subjective experience of social change: comparisons between East and West Germans – cohort and gender effects

We now turn to parts of our own longitudinal studies on the subjective experience of social change. The focus is on individual differences in social and personal factors as part of individual resources. These resources are related to assumed differences in socialization with respect to growing up in East or West Germany, as female or male, as a member of a certain cohort, and as a child, an adolescent, or adult.

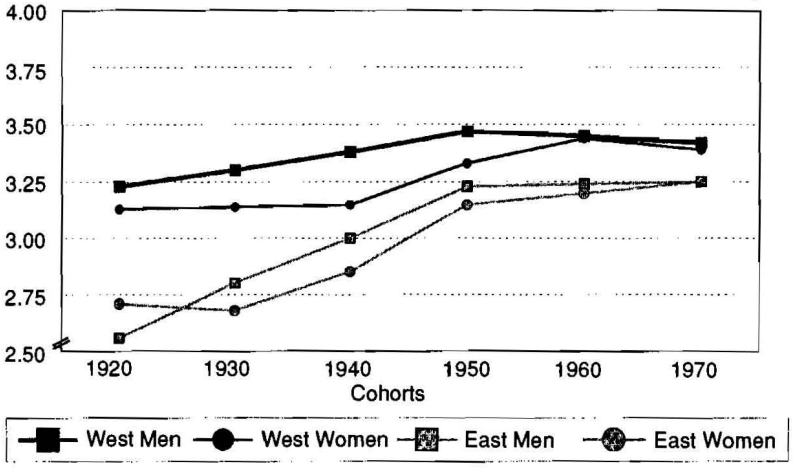
One study is based on data from the representative German socio-economic panel study (SOEP) which was originally designed to study changes of social and economic conditions of the West German population.[2] Since unification, data collection has been extended to representative samples from East Germany. Also, recently, psychological indicators for well-being have been included, which partly allow us to measure the subjective experience of socio-economic and political conditions and their changes. In the following, we focus on the study carried out in 1995, six years after unification, which included some psychological indicators of interest.[3]

Adjustment to social change and subjective wellbeing: Recent empirical studies

East and West Germans obviously differed when being asked how they had adjusted to the experience of social change. East Germans as compared to West Germans reported more difficulties in adjusting to changing contexts. East German women born between 1930 and 1950 reported the highest incidence of difficulties in adjustment (see Figure 4.2).

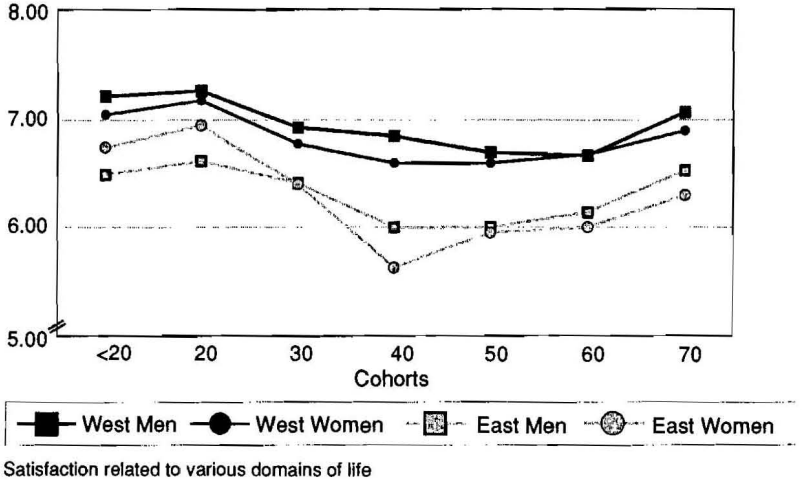
These results demonstrate that the objectively more dramatic social changes in East Germany affected subjective experience. Further data demonstrate that the life satisfaction of East Germans, as compared to West Germans – again of females born around 1940 – was lower (see Figure 4.3).

These results underline the differential effects of social change among people differing in *gender* and *age*: working women have been the most negatively affected by the changing work situation. East



Scale: 1 = agree to 4 = disagree
Source: SOEP, 1995

Figure 4.2 Difficulty in adjusting to changing contexts: a comparison of East and West German cohorts



Satisfaction related to various domains of life
Scale: 0 = dissatisfied to 10 = satisfied
Source: SOEP, 1995

Figure 4.3 Life satisfaction of East and West German cohorts

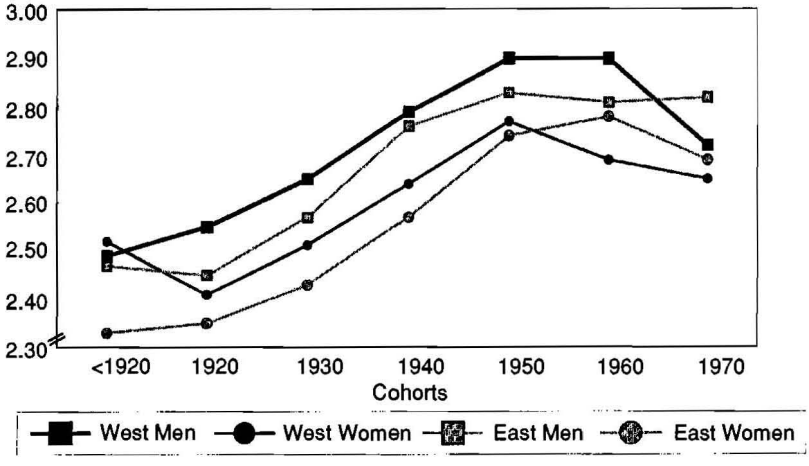
German women were guaranteed life-long employment under the former GDR system; after re-unification they lost their economic security, and they also lost the advantages of being embedded in informal social networks at the workplace. In general, East German women, especially the 1940 cohort, seem to be the main losers. On the other hand, East German women above the age of 60 report significantly higher satisfaction. Retired people have often been considered 'winners'.

The data from the SOEP (1995) on gender differences with respect to personal resources indicate that East German females were experiencing more difficulties in response to the social change. This is further supported by data on control beliefs. East German females were more fatalistic than any other group (see Figure 4.4).

Furthermore, the East German females' future orientation was more pessimistic as compared to the other groups (see Figure 4.5).

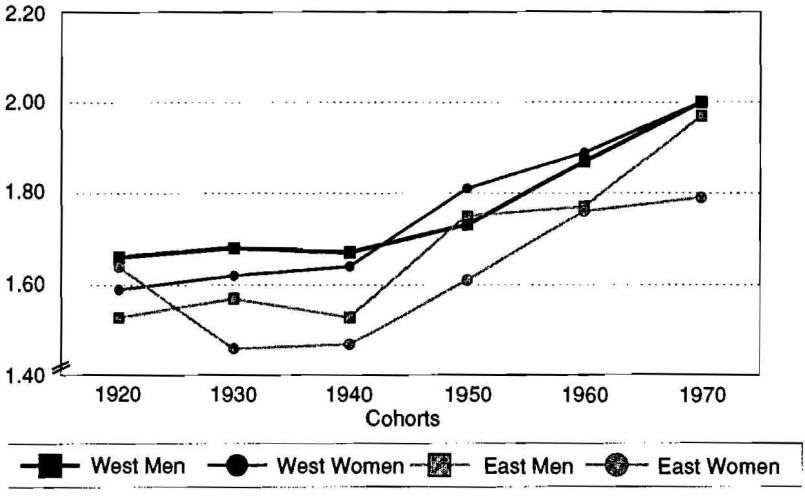
The results from this analysis reveal that East Germans, as compared to West Germans in general, were less optimistic. The most striking differences occurred for the young adults (1970 cohort): East German females were significantly more pessimistic than West German females or males from either East or West Germany.

These results are in line with those from another recent longitudinal study. We compared the future orientation (optimism/pessimism) of



Scale: 1 = agree to 4 = disagree
Source: SOEP, 1995

Figure 4.4 Belief in external control of East and West German cohorts

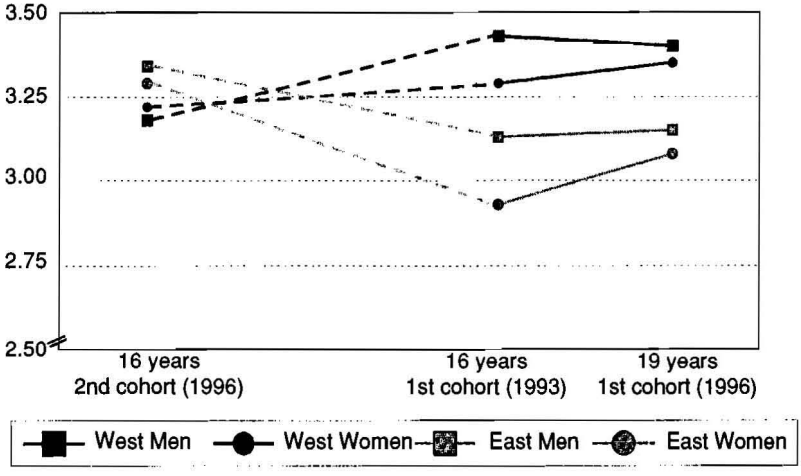


Scale: 1 = pessimistic to 4 = optimistic
Source: SOEP, 1995

Figure 4.5 Optimism of East and West German cohorts

East and West German adolescents. (N = 80 West German (Saarbrücken, Konstanz) and N = 60 East German (Brandenburg) adolescents (16-years-old) participated in this study.) The instrument used was the Life Orientation Test (LOT) by Scheier and Carver (1985). The results revealed significantly higher pessimism among East as compared to West German adolescents with respect to achieving their life goals. This difference was due to higher pessimism among East German females (Trommsdorff and Kornadt, 1995). Three years later, we used the same instrument a) with the students from the first study and b) for a control group of 16 year old students (N = 54 students from East Germany, N = 73 students from West Germany). The younger cohort from this second study revealed no significant difference between East German as compared to West German adolescents, while the older cohort from East Germany was still more pessimistic compared to the same cohort from West Germany (Trommsdorff and Kornadt, 1998) (see Figure 4.6).

It is unclear whether the East German older cohort of adolescents in our study had been affected more negatively by the ongoing social changes, or whether they had held more pessimistic attitudes before unification, or whether such pessimism was related to their specific developmental tasks. Another follow-up of these groups of adolescents



Scale: 0 = no optimism to 4 = high optimism

Figure 4.6 Optimism of two cohorts of East and West German adolescents

is underway in order to test the stability of future orientation and its function in the process of adapting to ongoing social changes.

Summary: effects of cohort, age, and gender: winners and losers of social change

The subjective experience of social change depends on gender, age, and cohort; it is mediated by, and it affects, personal factors. However, the directions of the effect are difficult to interpret: differences in personal factors between East and West Germans may indicate effects of social change and/or previously established resources for coping. Even when studies on control and future orientation are based on longitudinal designs, information on attitudes *before* unification are not at hand. Also, no differentiation between the various functions of control and future orientation, including mental simulation for coping, is usually available. So far, little information about the experience of social change and individual differences is available.

The results from the SOEP indicate only that East Germans, as compared to West Germans, have difficulties in adjusting to ongoing changes; they also experience less satisfaction and more pessimism. However, East German women reveal relatively high life satisfaction during retirement and very low life satisfaction at the age of about 50

when options in the labour market are reduced. Retired people (including women) above the age of 60 can be considered winners: they receive a stable pension which is much higher than under the former GDR system. It often occurs that East German grandparents' monthly incomes are higher than the incomes of their working adult children and grandchildren. However, this way of defining winners and losers according to income and employment is too simplistic and only partly accounts for the *subjective* experiences of social change after the collapse of the former GDR.

Here the question arises as to whether older East Germans are profiting more from their past experience in the former GDR, which provided numerous challenges for problem-solving (cf. Holahan and Moos, 1985, for a 'personal growth model'), or whether they are profiting mainly from the objective increase in material well-being after unification. To summarize, the timing of transition in East Germany is positive for the older age group while it is obviously more problematic for their children who are about 50 years of age, and for the young generation of adolescents. Longitudinal studies of these cohorts may clarify particularly the role of social and individual factors in contributing to individual resources when negotiating social change.

Effects of developmental age and timing of social change on social behaviour

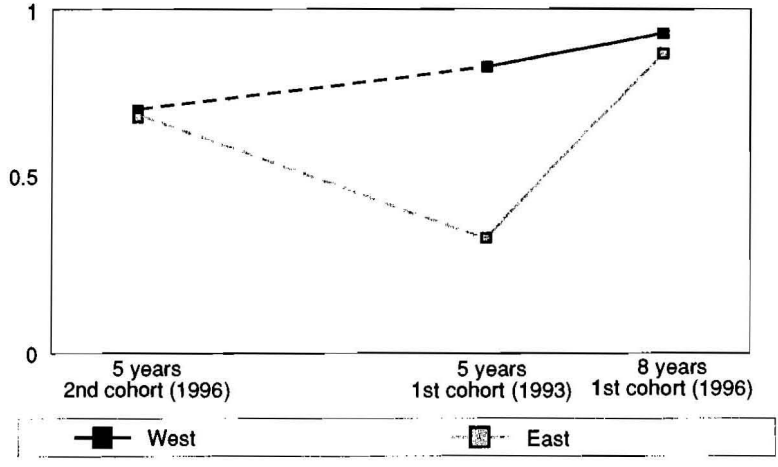
From a developmental point of view, the effects of social change on social behaviour are of special interest. In our longitudinal research[4] we studied the development of pro-social and anti-social motivation in children and adolescents (Trommsdorff and Kornadt, 1995; 1998; Trommsdorff, Kornadt and Hessel-Scherf, 1998).

(a) As we have seen from the panel studies, persons of *different developmental ages* can be affected differently by various features of social change. The impact of social change depends on the time of its occurrence in individual development. In our longitudinal research we studied 5- and 8-year-old children and their mothers, and 16- and 19-year-old adolescents from East and West Germany with respect to pro-social and anti-social motivation in interaction with peers (main study: first measurement, 1992; second measurement, 1995; third measurement, 1998). In the following account, the focus is only on children. The subjects included N = 40 5-year-old and 29 8-year-old boys and girls from Brandenburg and N = 54 5-year-old and 34 8-year-old boys and girls from Konstanz and Saarbrücken. As instruments, scenario

techniques to measure pro-social behaviour (APS) and aggression (AS) were used (picture stories of different interaction situations between two children). The answers of the children were coded into the following categories: pro-social behaviour (APS); (verbal and behavioural) aggression, neutral behaviour (verbal and behavioural), pro-social behaviour (AS). The results demonstrated that the 5- and 8-year-old children from the two regions did not differ with respect to aggression but East German, as compared to West German, children showed significantly less pro-social behavior at the age of 5 years while these differences had disappeared by the age of 8 (see Figures 4.7a, 4.7b). Furthermore, the internal structure of the aggression motive was similar for East and West German children: e.g., negative evaluations of the aggressor and the attribution of negative intentions correlated with aggressive tendencies. Also, mothers' socialization behaviour was related in the same way to children's proneness to aggression; these specific aggression-related socialization conditions did not differ between the East and West German samples. It seems that East and West German children at the age of 5 years had experienced similar mother–child interactions. Whether socialization conditions changed later on is presently being investigated in our study.

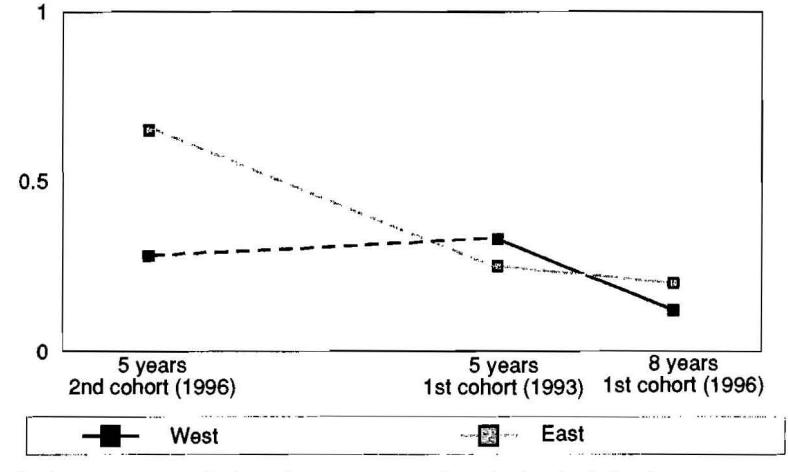
(b) People encountered the effects of social changes at *different stages*. Three years after the first measurement, we studied a comparable sample of 5-year-olds in order to control for possible period effects. We used the same instruments in order to ascertain comparability between the age groups. (N = 21 East German children and N = 44 West German children participated in this second study.) Socio-demographic data were similar to those of the 5-year-olds studied three years before. The East German 5-year-old control group showed more pro-social behaviour compared with the same-aged East German children studied three years previously. On the other hand, the same control group of 5-year-old children who were tested in 1995 showed significant differences with respect to aggression: East German children preferred aggressive behaviour more frequently than West German children (see Figures 4.7a, 4.7b). These results show that in the course of individual development the ongoing social changes were producing both negative and positive effects for the social behaviour of East German children.

East German preschool children who encountered the effects of the social changes at an earlier stage in the transformation preferred less pro-social action and more aggression compared with a control group of children who experienced the effects of social change at a later



Scale: 0 = no pro-social behaviour to 1 = pro-social behaviour in all situations

Figure 4.7a Pro-social behaviour of two cohorts of East and West German children



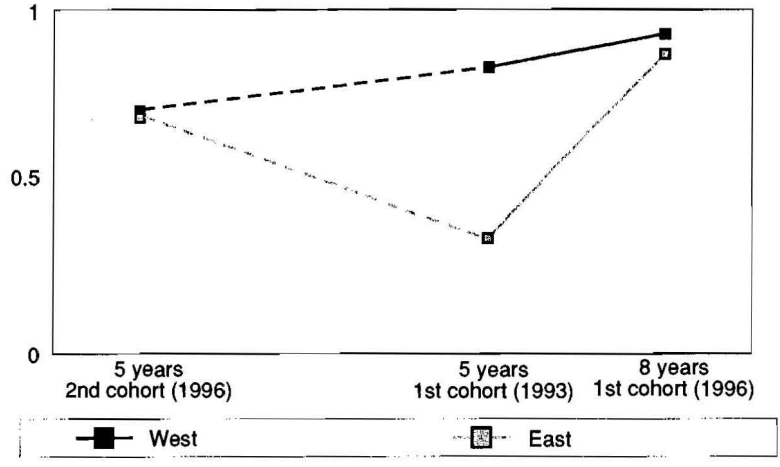
Scale: 0 = non-aggressive behaviour to 1 = aggressive behaviour in all situations

Figure 4.7b Aggressive behaviour of two cohorts of East and West German children

techniques to measure pro-social behaviour (APS) and aggression (AS) were used (picture stories of different interaction situations between two children). The answers of the children were coded into the following categories: pro-social behaviour (APS); (verbal and behavioural) aggression, neutral behaviour (verbal and behavioural), pro-social behaviour (AS). The results demonstrated that the 5- and 8-year-old children from the two regions did not differ with respect to aggression but East German, as compared to West German, children showed significantly less pro-social behavior at the age of 5 years while these differences had disappeared by the age of 8 (see Figures 4.7a, 4.7b). Furthermore, the internal structure of the aggression motive was similar for East and West German children: e.g., negative evaluations of the aggressor and the attribution of negative intentions correlated with aggressive tendencies. Also, mothers' socialization behaviour was related in the same way to children's proneness to aggression; these specific aggression-related socialization conditions did not differ between the East and West German samples. It seems that East and West German children at the age of 5 years had experienced similar mother–child interactions. Whether socialization conditions changed later on is presently being investigated in our study.

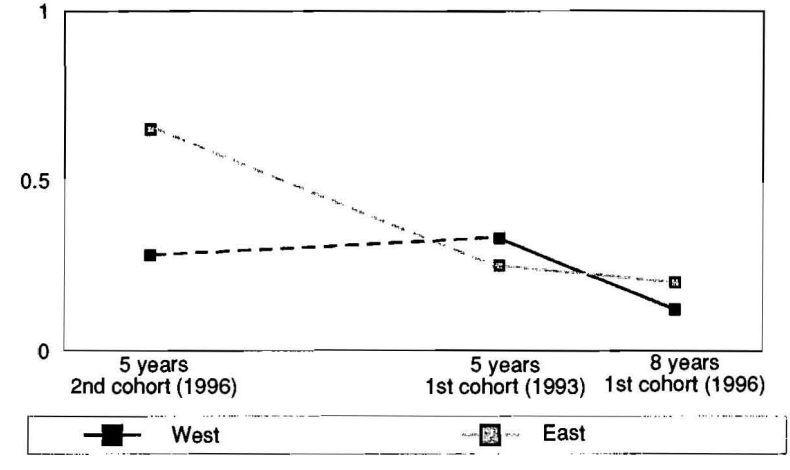
(b) People encountered the effects of social changes at *different stages*. Three years after the first measurement, we studied a comparable sample of 5-year-olds in order to control for possible period effects. We used the same instruments in order to ascertain comparability between the age groups. (N = 21 East German children and N = 44 West German children participated in this second study.) Socio-demographic data were similar to those of the 5-year-olds studied three years before. The East German 5-year-old control group showed more pro-social behaviour compared with the same-aged East German children studied three years previously. On the other hand, the same control group of 5-year-old children who were tested in 1995 showed significant differences with respect to aggression: East German children preferred aggressive behaviour more frequently than West German children (see Figures 4.7a, 4.7b). These results show that in the course of individual development the ongoing social changes were producing both negative and positive effects for the social behaviour of East German children.

East German preschool children who encountered the effects of the social changes at an earlier stage in the transformation preferred less pro-social action and more aggression compared with a control group of children who experienced the effects of social change at a later



Scale: 0 = no pro-social behaviour to 1 = pro-social behaviour in all situations

Figure 4.7a Pro-social behaviour of two cohorts of East and West German children



Scale: 0 = non-aggressive behaviour to 1 = aggressive behaviour in all situations

Figure 4.7b Aggressive behaviour of two cohorts of East and West German children

stage. Obviously, the children had experienced different challenges at different stages of ongoing changes which affected their social behaviour and development differently.

The quality of socialization of both cohorts of children in East Germany was different: the older cohort experienced early childhood in the relatively stable environment of the former GDR (including day care), and had experienced the effects of the transformation only after the second year of life or even later. The younger cohort had, from the beginning, grown up in an environment which had undergone continuous socio-economic change. These children had presumably experienced more changes in their immediate environment in the family and in their peer group in the course of their early development compared with the older cohort, and compared with the West German children. Possibly, such changes may have been connected with higher rates of social support, and hostility, and thus may have contributed to their experience of both types of social behaviour – pro-social and aggressive.

Future research is needed to show whether the preference for both pro-social and aggressive behaviour remains stable for this cohort of East German children. For East German adolescents, comparable results are reported by Sturzbecher (1997). Currently, more anti-social behaviour and, at the same time, more incidents of pro-social behavior, such as solidarity, can be observed than several years earlier. Do the experience of social change, related stress, and the need for coping, increase both pro-social and anti-social motivation: the need for solidarity and social support on the one hand, and the need to harm others on the other? Also, we may ask whether these two systems of motives represent specific resources for coping which are of differential functional value at different times of development (cf. Zahn-Waxler, Cummings and Iannotti, 1986).

When social change has induced significant changes in children's proximal social environments, in and outside the family, both challenges and risks for children's emotional and social development can arise. These contribute to the higher preference for pro-social and also for aggressive action. However, it still has to be seen how stable such effects are, and whether ongoing social change on the one hand, and changes in children's proximal environments arising from transitions (entering school and experiencing other socialization effects outside the family) on the other, may increase or compensate for developmental risks. The third measurement of our main sample and the second measurement of our control group (when these children will also be

8 years old) are in process and will contribute to the testing of the effects of developmental age, cohort, and period of social change.

Conclusion and outlook

Social change affects people at different developmental ages and from different cohorts at different periods during the course of the change in different ways. It is assumed that this results from different experiences of the social change and the different uses made of coping strategies. The subjective dimensions of social change alert us to the fact that people may experience and evaluate changes in their proximal environments as threatening and stressful life events or as promising challenges. Both the experience and the way of negotiating social change will be related to the way the person makes use of his or her individual resources. These include goals, competence, beliefs and perceived social resources. Studies of the effects of social change should focus more on the internal processes of experiencing and negotiating the change and how these are mediated and modified by social conditions and personal factors.

Studies of social change in East Germany rarely deal with questions concerning the psychological experience of changes in the period of transition. These include what kind of changes are experienced in which way, whether persons experience more negative or more positive changes, and whether the experience of change changes its meaning in the context of other experiences. Social change events will be interpreted not only once, at the time of their first appearance, but, when the person is aware of such changes, on successive occasions in the process of change, and while other events are happening. Social change events which may have been experienced originally as negative may, in the light of later experiences, lose their negative meanings, or the other way round. Also, ongoing social changes, including objective changes in a person's proximal environment, may lose their character of novelty, and may thereby change their subjective meaning.

People can adjust to social changes and increase their individual resources by activating, for example, social support and/or by intra-individual processes of habituation, mental simulation and so on. People can accommodate and habituate to all kinds of changes in their environments on the basis of multiple processes of balancing inconsistencies by changing their goals, control beliefs, or behaviour. When experiencing events which block goal attainment, people may re-arrange their goal structures and disengage from unattainable goals

(secondary control), or they may actively change their situations in search of supportive or new positive events (primary control). Obviously, individual differences in negotiating social change have to be taken into account. Therefore, beside a stress-buffering model of coping with negative events (through perceived social support, for example), a personal growth model may be applicable when studying the subjective aspects of social change. From a developmental point of view, the experience of social change (and related positive and negative events) may create opportunities for psychological growth. Thus, human plasticity may enable individuals to negotiate the effects of social changes in ways that allow for successful coping and the ultimate improvement of their social and personal resources.

Notes

1. Parts of this study were supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).
2. The SOEP is a project at the Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (DIW), Berlin. The SOEP is partly supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the Federal State of Berlin, and the German Government (Ministry of Technology, Research and Education, BMBF).
3. I am indebted to Friedhelm Löffelhardt who carried out the difficult task of secondary analyses of the data from the SOEP.
4. The longitudinal study reported here refers to our project 'Pro- and antisocial motivation of children and adolescents in the old and new German federal states' and was supported by the Deutsche Forschungsmeinschaft (DFG).

References

Ainsworth, J., Blehar, M., Waters, E. and Wall, S. (1978) *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Band, E. B. and Weisz, J. R. (1988) 'How to feel better when it feels bad: Children's perspectives on coping with everyday stress', *Developmental Psychology*, **24**: 247–53.

Bandura, A. (1994) *Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York: Freeman.

Bowlby, J. (1969) *Attachment and Loss:* Vol. 1: *Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiment by Nature and Design*. London: Harvard University Press.

Brunstein, J. C. (1993) 'Personal goals and subjective well-being: a longitudinal study', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65: 1061–70.

Brunstein, J. C., Dangelmayer, G. and Schultheiss, O. C. (1996) 'Personal goals and social support in close relationships: effects on relationship mood and marital satisfaction', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **71**: 1006–19.

Cantor, N. and Norem, J. K. (1989) 'Defensive pessimism and stress and coping', *Social Cognition*, **7**: 92–112.

Carver, C. S. and Scheier, M. F. (1990) 'Origins and functions of positive and negative affect: A control-process view', *Psychological Review*, **97**: 19–35.

Conger, R. D., Elder, G. H., Lorenz, F. O., Conger, K. J., Simons, R. L., Whitbeck, L. B., Huck, S. and Melby, J. N. (1990) 'Linking economic hardship to marital quality and instability', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, **52**: 643–56.

Conger, R. D., Ge, X., Elder, G. H., Lorenz, F. O. and Simons, R. L. (1994) 'Economic stress, coercive family process, and developmental problems of adolescents', *Child Development*, **65**: 541–61.

Elder, G. H. (1974). *The Children of the Great Depression: Social Change and Life Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Essau, C. and Trommsdorff, G. (1996) 'Coping with university-related problems: a cross-cultural comparison', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, **27**: 315–28.

Festinger, L. (1968) *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Flammer, A. (1990) *Erfahrung der eigenen Wirksamkeit: Einführung in die Psychologie der Kontrollmeinung* [Experience of own efficacy: introduction to the psychology of control beliefs]. Bern: Huber.

Folkman, S. and Lazarus, R. S. (1991) 'Coping and emotion', in A. Monat and R. S. Lazarus (eds), *Stress and Coping: An Anthology* (3rd edn: 207–27). New York: Guilford Press.

Friedlmeier, W. and Trommsdorff, G. (1997) Preferences of individual control strategies in a cultural perspective. Paper presented at the 8th European Conference on Developmental Psychology, Rennes, France, 3–7 September.

Friedrich, W. and Griese, H. (Hrsg.) (1991) *Jugend und Jugendforschung in der DDR. Gesellschaftspolitische Situationen, Sozialisation und Mentalitätsentwicklung in den achtziger Jahren* [Youth and youth research in the German Democratic Republic. Adolescents' social situation, socialization, and mentality in the 1980s]. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.

Gensicke, T. (1996) *Von der Transformation zur Integration. Die Ostdeutschen an der Schnittstelle zwischen individueller Anpassung und Vergesellschaftung im neuen Deutschland* [From transformation to integration]. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Hochschule für Verwaltungswissenschaften Speyer.

Heckhausen, J. and Schulz, R. (1995) 'A lifespan theory of control', *Psychological Review*, **102**: 284–304.

Holahan, C. J. and Moos, R. H. (1985) 'Life stress and health: personality, coping, and family support in stress resistance', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **49**: 739–47.

Jahoda, M., Lazarsfeld, P. F. and Zeisel, H. (1972) *Marienthal: The Sociology of an Unemployed Community*. New York: Aldine–Atherton.

Jessor, R. and Jessor, S. L. (1977) *Problem Behavior and Psychological Behavior: A Longitudinal Study of Youth*. New York: Academic Press.

Kornadt, H.-J. (1982) *Aggressionsmotiv und Aggressionshemmung* [Aggression motive and aggression inhibition]. Bern: Huber.

Lerner, R. M. (1986) *Concepts and Theories of Human Development* (2nd edn). New York: Random House.

Lopez, D. F. and Little, T. D. (1996) 'Children's action-control beliefs and emotional regulation in the social domain', *Developmental Psychology*, **32**: 299–312.

Mannheim, K. (1952) 'The problem of generations', in K. Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (pp. 276–322). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1928)

Meulemann, H. (1996) *Werte und Wertewandel: Zur Identität einer geteilten und wieder vereinten Nation* [Values and value change: identity of a divided and reunited nation]. Weinheim: Juventa.

Nuttin, J. (1984) *Motivation, action, and planning: a relational theory of behaviour dynamics*. Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press.

Reis, O. (1993) *Risiken und Ressourcen für die Persönlichkeitsentwicklung im Übergang zum Erwachsenenalter: Die Rostocker Längsschnittstudie nach 20 Jahren* [Risks and resources of the development of personality in transition to adulthood]. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Universität Rostock.

Roether, D. and Kunze, H. (1995) 'Lebenssituation alter Menschen: Ein Ost–West-Vergeich' [The life situation of the elderly: A comparison between East and West Germany], *Zeitschrift für Gerontopsychologie und -psychiatrie*, **8**: 263–72.

Scheier, M. F. and Carver, C. S. (1985) 'Optimism, coping, and health: assessment and implications of generalized outcome expectancies', *Health Psychology*, **4**: 219–47.

Scheier, M. F. and Carver, C. S. (1992) 'Effects of optimism on psychological and physical well-being: theoretical overview and empirical update', *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, **16**, 201–28.

Schnabel, K., Baumert, J. and Roeder, P. (1994) 'Wertewandel in Ost und West: Ein Vergleich von Jugendlichen und Erwachsenen in den neuen und alten Bundesländern' [Value change in East and West: a comparison of adolescents and adults in the Western And Eastern German states], in G. Trommsdorff (ed.), *Psychologische Aspekte des sozio-politischen Wandels in Ostdeutschland* (pp. 77–93). Berlin: DeGruyter.

Seginer, R. (1997) *Defensive Pessimism and Optimism Correlates of Adolescent Future Orientation: A Domain-specific Analysis*. Manuscript submitted for publication, Haifa University.

Seginer, R., Trommsdorff, G. and Essau, C. A. (1993) 'Adolescent control beliefs: cross-cultural variations of primary and secondary orientations', *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, **16**: 242–60.

Silbereisen, R. K., Eyfert, K. and Rudinger, G. (eds). (1986) *Development as Action in Context: Problem Behavior and Normal Youth Development*. New York: Springer.

SOEP: Sozio-ökonomisches Panel [Socio-economic panel] (1995) Berlin: Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung.

Sturzbecher, D. (ed.) (1997) *Jugend und Gewalt in Ostdeutschland: Lebenserfahrungen in Schule, Freizeit und Familie* [Youth and violence in East Germany: life experiences in school, leisure time and family]. Göttingen: Hogrefe.

Suh, E., Diener, E. and Fujita, F. (1996) 'Events and subjective well-being: only recent events matter', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **70**: 1091–102.

Taylor, S. E. and Lobel, M. (1989) 'Social comparison activity under threat: downward evaluation and upward contacts', *Psychological Bulletin*, **96**: 569–75.

Trommsdorff, G. (1984) 'Familiale Sozialisation im Kulturvergleich: Japan und Deutschland' [Cross-cultural comparison of socialization in the family: Japan and Germany]. *Zeitschrift für Sozialisationsforschung und Erziehungssoziologie*, **4**: 79–97.

Trommsdorff, G. (1986) 'Future time orientation and its relevance for development as action', in R. K. Silbereisen, K. Eyferth and G. Rudinger (eds.), *Development as Action in Context* (pp. 121–36). Berlin: Springer.

Trommsdorff, G. (1994a) 'Future time perspective and control orientation: social conditions and consequences', in Z. Zaleski (ed.), *Psychology of Future Orientation* (pp. 39–62). Lublin, Poland: TN Kul.

Trommsdorff, G. (1994b) 'Psychologische Probleme bei den Transformationsprozessen in Ostdeutschland' [Psychological aspects of sociopolitical change in Eastern Germany], in G. Trommsdorff (ed.), *Psychologische Aspekte des sozio-politischen Wandels in Ostdeutschland* (pp. 19–42). Berlin: DeGruyter.

Trommsdorff, G. (1994c) 'Zukunft als Teil individueller Handlungsorientierungen' [The future as part of individual action orientations], in E. Holst, J. P. Rinderspacher and J. Schupp (eds), *Erwartungen an die Zukunft* (pp. 45–76). Frankfurt: Campus.

Trommsdorff, G. (in press-a). 'Effects of social change and individual development: the role of social and personal factors, and the timing of events', in L. Crocket and R. K. Silbereisen (eds), *Negotiating Adolescence in Times of Social Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Trommsdorff, G. (in press-b) 'Social change and individual development in East Germany: a methodological critique', in R. K. Silbereisen and A. von Eye (eds), *Growing Up in Times of Social Change*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Trommsdorff, G., Burger, C., Füchsle, T. and Lamm, H. (1978) *Erziehung für die Zukunft* [Socialization for the future]. Düsseldorf: Schwann.

Trommsdorff, G. and Chakkarath, P. (with the collaboration of P. Heller) (1996) 'Kindheit im Transformationsprozess' [Childhood in the process of transformation], in S. Hormuth, W. R. Heinz, H.-J. Kornadt, H. Sydow and G. Trommsdorff (eds), *Individuelle Entwicklung, Bildung und Berufsverläufe*, Vol. 4, pp. 11–77. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.

Trommsdorff, G. and Essau, C. A. (1998) Adolescents' control orientation: a cross-cultural study. In G. Trommsdorff, W. Friedlmeier, and H.-J. Kornadt (eds), *Japan in Transition – Psychological and Sociological Aspects*. Lengerich: Pabst Science Publishers.

Trommsdorff, G. and Kornadt, H.-J. (1995) 'Prosocial and antisocial motivation of adolescents in East and West Germany', in J. Youniss (ed.), *After the Wall: Family Adaptations in East and West Germany. New Directions for Child Development*, No. 70, pp. 39–56. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Trommsdorff, G. and Kornadt, H.-J. (1998) *Pro-social and Anti-social Motivation of East and West German Children and Adolescents*. Manuscript in preparation.

Trommsdorff, G., Kornadt, H.-J. and Hessel-Scherf, M. (1998) 'Soziale Motivation ost- und westdeutscher Kinder' [Social motivation of East and West German children], *Zeitschrift für Sozialisationsforschung und Erziehungssoziologie*, 18, pp. 121–36.

Vinokur, A. D., Price, R. H. and Caplan, R. D. (1996) 'Hard times and hurtful partners: how financial strain affects depression and relationship satisfaction of unemployed persons and their spouses', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71: 166–79.

Weisz, J. R., Rothbaum, F. M. and Blackburn, T. C. (1984) 'Standing out and standing in: the psychology of control in America and Japan', *American Psychologist*, 39: 955–69.

Wills, T. A. (1981) 'Downward comparison principles in social psychology', *Psychological Bulletin*, **90**: 245–71.

Wills, T. A. (1991) 'Social support and interpersonal relationships', in M. S. Clark (ed.), *Review of Personality and Social Psychology: Vol. 12: Prosocial Behavior* (pp. 265–89). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Wills, T. A. and Cleary, S. D. (1996) 'How are social support effects mediated? A test with parental support and adolescent substance use', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **71**: 937–52.

Wills, T. A., Mariani, J. and Filer, M. (1996) 'The role of family and peer relationships in adolescent substance use', in G. R. Pierce, B. R. Sarason and I. G. Sarason (eds), *Handbook of Social Support and the Family* (pp. 521–49). New York: Plenum.

Zahn-Waxler, C., Cummings, E. M. and Iannotti, R. J. (1986) *Altruism and Aggression: Biological and Social Origins*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zapf, W. and Habich, R. (1995) 'Die sich stabilisierende Transformation – ein deutscher Sonderweg?' [Stabilizing transformation – A specific German way?], in H. Rudolph (ed.), *Geplanter Wandel, ungeplante Wirkungen. Handlungslogiken und -ressourcen im Prozess der Transformation* (pp. 137–59). Berlin: Edition Sigma.

Zinnecker, J. and Silbereisen, R. K. (1996) *Kindheit in Deutschland: Aktueller Survey über Kinder und ihre Eltern* [Childhood in Germany: a current survey of children and their parents]. Weinheim: Juventa.