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Dealing with Challenges of Social and Economic Change: Role of Agency in Regional and International Comparison.

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Abstract

Political transformations confluent with globalization, economic jeopardy, demographic change, and international migration present new uncertainties for many people and families. As uncertainties are unsettling and interfere with behavior planning, especially if concerning one's place in the world and self-identity, individuals tend to spend motivational energy, cognitive structuring, and contextual resources in dealing with uncertainties. In a decade-long research program, we analyzed people's striving in a cross-region/country comparative fashion, assessed during times of growing unemployment due to economic recession. Results revealed that most try to overcome the uncertainties by engagement rather than disengagement, meaning that they actively try to overcome obstacles, especially when they have congruent control beliefs and other resources. The negative effects of uncertainties on psychological and economic well-being were less pronounced if the welfare system in the country was more generous, and if they lived in economically precarious regions high in unemployment, thereby revealing a social norm effect. Consequences of the complex person–environment interactions for public policy are discussed.

Introduction

We live in a time of radical change of the world we were used to – the megatrend is change to a "new multi-center, multi-option world" (Naisbitt & Naisbitt, 2016). Key drivers include political conflict, globalization, economic challenges, climate change, international migration, and demographic change. This implies change of the physical environment we live in, the economic systems and technologies we use, the basic cultural belief systems that guide us, and the societal institutions that organize our public life.

What is social change?

Such "social change" for short is not new; it has always accompanied the history of humankind. Measured in human lifetimes, some social change is low and emerging, such as the increase of individualism in countries of the global North-West over the last century, probably triggered by change in socioeconomic structures and modes of production that require greater self-autonomy. One amazing indication is the increase of words carrying individualistic and the decrease of words carrying collectivist agency, found in books from the USA published between 1860 and 2006. Examples are "able" or "achieved" for individualistic and "together" or "belong" for collectivist words (Grossmann & Varnun, 2015). Using the Google Ngram Viewer, Twenge, Campell, and Gentile (2012) also confirmed for the years 1960 to 2008 a trend toward and increasing focus on the self and uniqueness. As both authors used different methodologies in identifying the relevant words, taken together it is a clear indication of emerging change in the values and attitudes as evidenced by language use in the population.

In contrast, some social change is rapid so that large portions of a population experience it during their lifetime in a certain period of history. A case in point is the breakup of the communist world order after 1989, combined with the effects of growing globalization and

intermittent economic crises later on, like the last two decades in Europe and other parts of the world like East Asia. Although the transition to a new order was more or less rapid, particularities of the old regime nevertheless left their trace. For instance, the strict control of citizens by the authorities during 40 years of socialism in East Germany resulted in lasting higher external control beliefs in that part of unified Germany 20 years after reunification (Friehe, Pannenberg, & Wedow, 2015). Such control beliefs are known to have negative consequences for economic success, because they influence economically relevant parameters of decision-making, like preferences (Becker et al., 2012).

In the remainder of this chapter, I first provide some arguments why investigating social change is an intriguing issue for current psychological science, and provide a short summary of major research concepts and strategies, including ones my own research group has pursued. Second, this is followed by a series of empirically grounded insights gained in a decade-long interdisciplinary research program. The report concentrates on how people deal with a range of prototypic new uncertainties in major life domains, characterizing social change in the 2000s in Germany and, for reasons of comparison, Poland. Third, future avenues of research on societal uncertainties of our times are discussed, thereby enlarging the focus to other uncertainties and other countries than those reported thus far. The final section provides a conclusion based on our research with some social policy implications.

Psychology and Social Change

Many believe that the pace of current social change is historically unprecedented, reflected by a broad scale of new challenging “uncertainties” for planning one’s life (Rosa, 2013), especially true for those less well-off to begin with. In spite of this, until recently there was not much research in psychology under this rubric at all. For instance, the phrase “social

change and well-being" had 684 entries in Psycinfo in September 2016 (counted from 1940 on), but as recently as 2010 it was only 360, and merely 125 in 2000. Obviously the figures indicate an upward trend, although still on a low level.

What is attractive for psychological science?

Whether emerging or rapid, social change requires the universal human potential for adaptation to new circumstances. Exploring how people achieve this is at the core of psychological science that focuses on the interaction between person and environment. More specifically, rapid social change affecting politics and economy on the level of entire societies on which we concentrate in this chapter is a model case for the study of individual agency under changing environmental opportunities on various levels of contexts, starting from society as a whole and continuing with contexts closer and closer to the individual, like regions or neighborhoods.

Past psychological research initiated by the political transitions of ex-communist societies gained an important insight – although at the surface the change affected all in an overwhelming way, there were obviously differences in people's resulting agency, particularly as a function of past experiences and the personality makeup of individuals. A famous published case concerns the role of self-efficacy in dealing with system change. According to Titma and Tuma (2005), people high in self-efficacy before the dissolution of the Soviet Union were better able to understand the political and economic principles of the emerging new society. Rather than staying in their accustomed but actually meanwhile obsolete occupational positions, they became successful entrepreneurs in small-scale trades, especially in the tumultuous time soon after the breakup, and in particular if they could rely on almost forgotten traditions of such activities, like in the Baltic States before they were integrated into the Soviet Union. This result shows that

personality differences play a role and that many years of a system that did not encourage individual economic activities were unable to wipe out historical reminiscences to the contrary, sitting in the environment that works as moderator. Self-efficacy is just an example, with the Big Five or attributes like inspiration and openness when confronted with challenges as other instances (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009).

Social change obviously opens up new opportunities, but often at the price of aversive new uncertainties experienced by the people vis-à-vis the new challenges rooted in the changed societal conditions (Westerhoff & Keyes, 2009). The rapid replacement of state-sponsored industries by companies following the market capitalistic logic, and the loss of markets in countries of the former Soviet-dominated block following German reunification, for instance, resulted in tremendously growing unemployment figures in the former East Germany subsequent to reunification. The changes on the labor market resulted in unsettling uncertainties about one's place in the world and interfered with the accustomed steps in planning a career (Solga & Diewald, 2001). Individual unemployment, to stay with this example, is known to reduce well-being, and interestingly enough the effect of growing uncertainties in the work domain is probably as large as the distinct event of losing one's job. More importantly, this negative association seems to be moderated by the unemployment rate on the aggregate level of regions – it is less severe if many others face apparently the same fate (Clark, Knabe, & Rätzel, 2010).

This brings me to the major reason why the study of social change is so promising for enriching psychological science. This is so because the moderating role of the environmental context on the relationship between uncertainties rooted in social change and psychosocial well-being represents a prototype of the research agenda and methodological approach of the new environment-minded psychology that focuses on individuals' dealing with challenges in real-life

environments, and thereby profits from interdisciplinary work with other social and behavioral sciences (Oishi, 2014; Clayton et al., 2016). The more such uncertainties concern major developmental tasks in the domains of work, family, and public life, the more people have to actively deal with them. Ignoring them is not an option due to the central role of such tasks in negotiating development and life.

Concepts and strategies

Studying social change requires a comparative approach to catch the evolving change across time. Research conducted by Kohn and his colleagues (2006) is famous. They compared several post-Soviet countries in Eastern Europe at a time when they represented different periods in the transformation to market economies. Poland, far advanced in this regard, was the pivot because here they could compare results obtained at times before the breakup and times after. In the old times they found among managers in the US that the more self-directed their work was, the more flexible their personality was found to be. This also applied to Poland during communist times, although workers were better off in this regard compared to managers. The results of the same comparison conducted after system change in Poland already resembled those in the US, whereas in other countries of Eastern Europe this effect was still in the making. Additional analyses in China showed a large urban–rural divide. The relationship in urban regions was as that in Poland after the system breakup, whereas in rural regions the old system appeared to be preserved.

Here, countries represented the continuum of social change. In other approaches like the British Longitudinal Studies different birth cohorts represent a similar continuum. Schoon and Parsons (2002), for instance, showed that job aspirations were more important for one’s future occupational status during economically stable times, whereas educational performance was

more important in economically precarious times. This difference reflects the growing demand for skilled workers in more recent historical periods characterized by economic pressures.

In our own past research, we used similar period comparisons around the time of German reunification and the results underscored the crucial role of changed social institutions for individual behavior. An example was the almost immediate effect of the adoption of the West German school system on the timing of education-related transitions in the former East – students took longer to form initial occupational plans due to the replacement of state-sponsored career planning by family-governed individual planning that also offered more options for education and training to choose from (Silbereisen, Reitzle, & Juang, 2002).

Major Insights in Dealing with Uncertainties of Social change

All the research mentioned thus far had in common that individual differences in the exposure to social change were deemed relatively irrelevant compared to the overarching influence of the political transition.

A new Model and research program

This view, however, is probably somewhat naïve and consequently around 2005 my research group began to focus on the role of individual variation in the degree to which people claimed to have experienced growing uncertainties in major domains of life like work or family brought about by social change. These “demands” became the central element in the Jena Model of Social Change and Human Development in which we addressed the cognitive–motivational processing of demands embedded in the larger contexts beyond the individual. This approach is reminiscent of the Elder–Conger tradition, originally formulated for the study of economic hardship (Elder & Conger, 2000). As shown in Figure 1, the demands (and also some benefits) are influenced by the social change on the macro level, “filtered” through personal features such

as education or work status that attenuate or amplify the effect of objective changes, for instance in the labor market, on the perceived demands. These demands were assessed by questionnaires that ask people to endorse the personal relevance of statements on change they experienced in a period of time in the domain of work (e.g. it has become more difficult to plan my career path) or family (e.g. I have to take more things into account when deciding about my relationship with partner or family). These statements all refer to important developmental tasks.

Figure 1 about here

The uncertainties addressed are conceived as being induced by social change in the 2000s, due to political transformation, globalization, and individualization. Evidence for this is not only given by various conceptual analyses of social change in Europe, but also based on objective statistical data concerning trends in the unemployment rate or the divorce rate in Germany at the time of the studies. The unemployment rate, for instance, increased during the "time window" of our research, and declined or remained stable soon after (Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2009).

High loads of demands are thought to overtax people's capabilities and result in negative consequences for well-being and other psychosocial and even physical outcomes like pain (Chou, Parmar, & Galinsky, 2016). According to the Jena Model the relationship between demands and outcomes is mediated and moderated by a range of coping attempts, thought to be especially effective when in line with opportunities, and the interplay with social and personal resources. The entire system within the individual affected by demands is also influenced by distal (countries, administrative regions) and proximal (opportunities on local levels) contexts that themselves are changing under conditions of social change. Finally, the system is embedded in the life course that is characterized by different developmental tasks, but also different

vulnerabilities to social change. To address this, we compared people in life stages before and after the transition to the labor market.

The research results reported in this chapter rely on a large representative set of data on adults beyond education and training up to the age of 45, but we also have data on younger people still in education and training, from age 16 on. The data are representative for four federal states in Germany (one more prosperous and one less prosperous, from the former East and West of the country, and the design allowed the comparison of administrative districts (NUTS-3), representing different opportunity structures on a more differentiated level. A similar approach was taken for Poland. The two countries underwent similar social change, but Poland provides a weaker welfare net (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Social_protection_statistics) and the population is much higher in uncertainty avoidance, a personality attribute (Hofstede, 2016) thought to be relevant in times of social change. Throughout this chapter, uncertainties referring to the labor market and the workplace are used by way of example. Data on family-related uncertainties often showed the same results, although the interpretation of course is specific to that domain of life.

Filtering by status and region

Concerning the NUTS-3 regions, we found as expected differences in the region-averaged demand load that reflected objective conditions as manifested in unemployment rates. This confirms that the uncertainties experienced have a solid base in objective circumstances, but it also shows that the demand load varies quite remarkably even between adjacent administrative regions. In other words, what people experience can be quite distinct for the region that is their home (Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2009). Further evidence for the rooting of demands in objective circumstances was reported by Tomasik and Silbereisen (submitted) with reference to the global

financial crisis at the end of the 2000s. Longitudinal data on German adults between 2005 and 2009 showed that the load of demands first declined, reminiscent of the recovery of the labor market at that time, but then a new peak occurred, reflecting the influence of the Great Recession in 2008/2009.

A similar filtering takes place by sociodemographic variables. Those adults better off in terms of current employment, intact family, higher education, and living in the west of Germany were less burdened by demands (Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2009). Among the young still in education and training the average load was lower, but appraisals of the demands as challenge vs. threat or gain vs. loss were more positive than reported by adults. This difference is understandable given the fact that for those beyond education and training demands represent a real experience, whereas for those younger and less advanced in education and career their views resemble informed expectations. At any rate, the outlook of the young is rather positive in spite of a bleak outlook when only considering objective criteria of the labor market (Lechner, Tomasik, & Silbereisen, in press).

For Poland we found overall the same results, but the demands were somewhat lower on average. In our understanding it was due to the fact that non-traditional forms of employment, implicating higher uncertainties, were less prevalent during the time of the research in Poland.

Do demands affect well-being negatively?

If demands indeed work as stressors that may even overtax individuals' coping capabilities, then they should correspond to lower well-being as a function of the load experienced. But effects may also run in the opposite direction, because lower well-being may induce higher uncertainties. To investigate this, we analyzed longitudinal data on the German adults. Using a particular statistical approach to model the mutual effect of trait-like well-being

and variable demands, Koerner, Silbereisen, and Cantner (2014) revealed that negative effects of about the same strength run in both directions – well-being seems to influence demands, but demands also affect well-being, and this is what we needed to confirm our view on their role.

In addition, in thus far unpublished work Silbereisen, Tomasik, and Gruemer (2014) demonstrated that demands have an effect on within-family economic pressures and well-being of family members beyond and above low income, income loss, unemployment, and downward trends in career. In other words, demands are indeed a distinct experience with effects on well-being, as expected.

Engagement and disengagement with demands

In our research, coping was assessed by way of "developmental regulation" (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010) distinguishing two basic modes: 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. Disengagement, in contrast, comes with 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. Both modes were assessed in several aspects, using items related to the demands.

In general, among adults engagement in dealing with the uncertainties was more prevalent than disengagement, demonstrating the general human capability of adaptation. Beyond that, however, we found a remarkable difference between the countries. For Germany engagement was high if the demands were positively appraised as challenge and gain. In Poland these appraisals were irrelevant for action. In our view this is a consequence of the lower welfare support in Poland that requires action irrespective of the quality of the demands (Tomasik,

Silbereisen, Lechner, & Wasilewski, 2013). For those still in education and training, the results were basically the same (Lechner, Tomasik, & Silbereisen, in press). According to Heckhausen (1999), the regulation by engagement and disengagement is thought to be especially efficient if matched with suitable control beliefs. More specifically, the effect of demands on well-being should be smaller (less negative than on average) when high engagement and high sense of control come together, whereas the negative relationship should be aggravated when incongruent combination applies. This is exactly what Gruemer, Silbereisen, and Heckhausen (2013) found. The congruent group in engagement, for instance, revealed a less negative or even a positive association with life satisfaction than the aggravate group.

Role of resources

Self-efficacy a topic of research on social change from early on, deemed a prototype of a resource relevant in dealing with new demands. Pinquart, Juang, and Silbereisen (2004), for instance, found that adolescents who were actually committed to the old communist regime in Germany experienced less reunification-related psychological distress if they were higher in self-efficacy dating back to the old times.

For the Germany–Poland comparison in dealing with the new uncertainties, we looked at the role of exploration, a disposition to scrutinize contexts and embrace novelty for personal growth (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009) in dealing with benefits provided by social change. Results for both countries showed that people high in exploration reaped new individualized lifestyle options and new learning opportunities characteristic of the evolving knowledge society more than those lower in exploration. Moreover, this general relationship was moderated by the degree to which the administrative regions they lived in offered contextual opportunities. Regions with higher divorce rates and with higher rates of Internet domain registrations had a stronger than average

association between exploration and people's utilizing of benefits, because the regions presumably provided more opportunities, frames of reference, and behavioral models for the new behaviors (Lechner, Obschonka, & Silbereisen, 2016).

Religiosity is another example of such an interaction between person and context in dealing with social change. Drawing on one's faith when confronted with demands presumably helps to enhance resources such as social support, hope, positive emotion, solace, and comfort. Because of widespread secularism in (East) Germany, we could study this in Poland only. Results again showed an interaction with regional opportunities. In prosperous regions the relationship between religiosity and engagement with demands was stronger, and in economically precarious regions the relationship with disengagement was stronger. Taken together, this pattern means that religiosity apparently functions as empowerment of opportunity-congruent coping (Lechner et al., 2014).

All layers of influence taken together

Until now, we confirmed details of the Jena Model separately, but a more comprehensive empirical approach should provide further evidence on the complex interplay between demands, coping/resources, psychosocial outcomes, and contexts. In a quintessential study, Pinquart, Silbereisen, and Koerner (2009) took the presumed social norm effect of aggregate-level unemployment rates as a backdrop (Clark, Knabe, & Rätzel, 2010) and investigated whether a moderation can be found in the interplay between uncertainties, coping, and outcomes. As they reported on the basis of multilevel analyses for adults currently in employment, the relationship between demands and well-being became less negative among those who lived in regions with high unemployment rates, meaning that unemployment is the norm and not a unique personal affair. The effect of engagement, however, was less positive than on average, presumably due to

the lower opportunities in such regions. Moreover, in economically precarious regions disengagement had a positive effect on well-being, thereby demonstrating that withdrawal in such a situation may preserve resources, perhaps induced by the attribution of the economic fate on "systemic" causes beyond one's responsibility (Forkel & Silbereisen, 2001). Supporting this, we found similar effects of disengagement on well-being among the long-term unemployed (Koerner, Reitzle, & Silbereisen, 2012).

Beyond well-being

In spite of its relevance for individuals and society as a whole, psychosocial well-being can be deemed a "soft" criterion for success in dealing with demands of social change, and thus one may wonder whether engagement with demands is also able to buffer people against "hard" facts in economic life. To that end, Koerner et al. (2015) utilizing longitudinal data compared the effect of prior high or low engagement on later odds of job loss and income loss, as a function of the regional unemployment rate. On average, a higher rate corresponded to higher odds in both outcomes, but the effect was no longer significant for high engagement, indicating the protective effect as expected.

Future Avenues

The research on the Jena Model addressed perceived changes to the worse in people's chances in resolving major developmental tasks, attributed to social change concerning political transformation, combined with the economic and psychological effects of globalization and intermittent economic crises later on. The report concentrated on aversive uncertainties related to the labor market and the workplace, but in other publications we demonstrated that the multilevel approach also applies to family demands (Pinquart, Silbereisen, & Koerner, 2010).

A more comprehensive assessment of demands, including further domains of life under pressure from social change, such as the political urge for “active ageing” (Pavlova & Silbereisen, 2012) may be interesting, but one could also analyze demands in more depth, such as following Kubicek, Paskvan, and Korunka (2014), who distinguished five aspects of accelerated change in contemporaneous societies reminiscent of Rosa (2013). Although in this chapter it came up only occasionally, there are obviously benefits of social change as well, and the effect of demands may be especially strong if not partially compensated by benefits (Obschonka, Silbereisen, & Wasilewski, 2012).

We used the German–Poland comparison as a way to analyze common vs. specific effects, with the latter presumably based on differences in the welfare net. Including other countries with different economic systems and different cultural beliefs is important for generalizing as well. We have made first steps in this regard related to China (Chen et al., 2010) and concerning Ghana (Mahama, Silbereisen, & Eccles, 2014), but much more should be done.

The moderation of the effects by contexts we found gave credence to the new environment-minded psychological science (Aisha, 2014), and is also relevant for public policy because the administrative regions we compared are typical foci of political action. What is not yet clear, however, is the exact mechanism that connects features of contexts with patterns of individual behaviors. A prime suspect so far is the social norm effect (Clark et al., 2010), but what exactly this means is not so clear. One possible psychological mechanism is social comparisons with other people. In an unpublished paper we found that living in an administrative region with a high unemployment rate corresponded to more frequent social comparisons, and that irrespective of the region social comparisons were associated with higher goal engagement and lower goal disengagement (Pavlova, Lechner, & Silbereisen, submitted). As the regions are

large and rather remote from the individual, features of lower-level contexts may be more relevant as mediators, such as signs of deterioration in people's immediate neighborhood, like many closed businesses or plenty of space to rent (Votruba-Drzal, Miller, & Coley, 2016), which then might induce relevant social comparisons.

Finally, it should be clear that we concentrated on well-being, broadly speaking, because it represents a driver of life success more generally. Well-being is also relevant for the core motivational process in the Jena Model – persistent engagement even after failed attempts. According to Haase et al. (in preparation), this capacity is higher with higher well-being. Nevertheless, a range of other aspects of behavior should be studied in more detail, such as civic engagement because it is known to keep a society together (Pavlova & Silbereisen, 2014).

Conclusion

Overall, people are quite good in coping with uncertainties of social change, given two major conditions. First, they need to be able to identify options by utilizing resources and tackle the challenges with control beliefs and congruent coping attempts. Second, they need to live under conditions where opportunities for such behaviors exist. Of course the processes spelled out in the Jena Model are actually more complicated, but these are the core ingredients for successfully dealing with demands of social change. This scenario requires multilevel studies of the person–environment interaction, analyzing the cascading effects from the aggregate to the individual level (2010). Interestingly, there seem to be no fundamental differences as a function of the stage in the life course. Rather, the young seem to be quite positive and optimistic when confronted with the demands.

When considering social policy perspective, one needs to bear in mind that uncertainties are an ordinary part of life for most people, and thus attempts at simply avoiding them will

probably fail. After all one also has to consider that resolving challenges may help people to grow (Friedmann & Kern, 2014; Mancini, Littleton, & Grills, 2015). Consequently, it is important to promote capabilities for adequate coping and control beliefs, whereby skills to perceive and exploit the opportunity structures in the environment should be core (Banerjee et al., 2014). In political terms this means rather than compensatory social spending for those in need only, one should invest in human capital development, fostering greater social inclusion (Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012).

All this will only work if contexts offer ample opportunities for striving, based on the skills promoted. Otherwise people will “accentuate” old behaviors rather than revert to the new behaviors required by the demands of social change (Caspi & Roberts, 2001).

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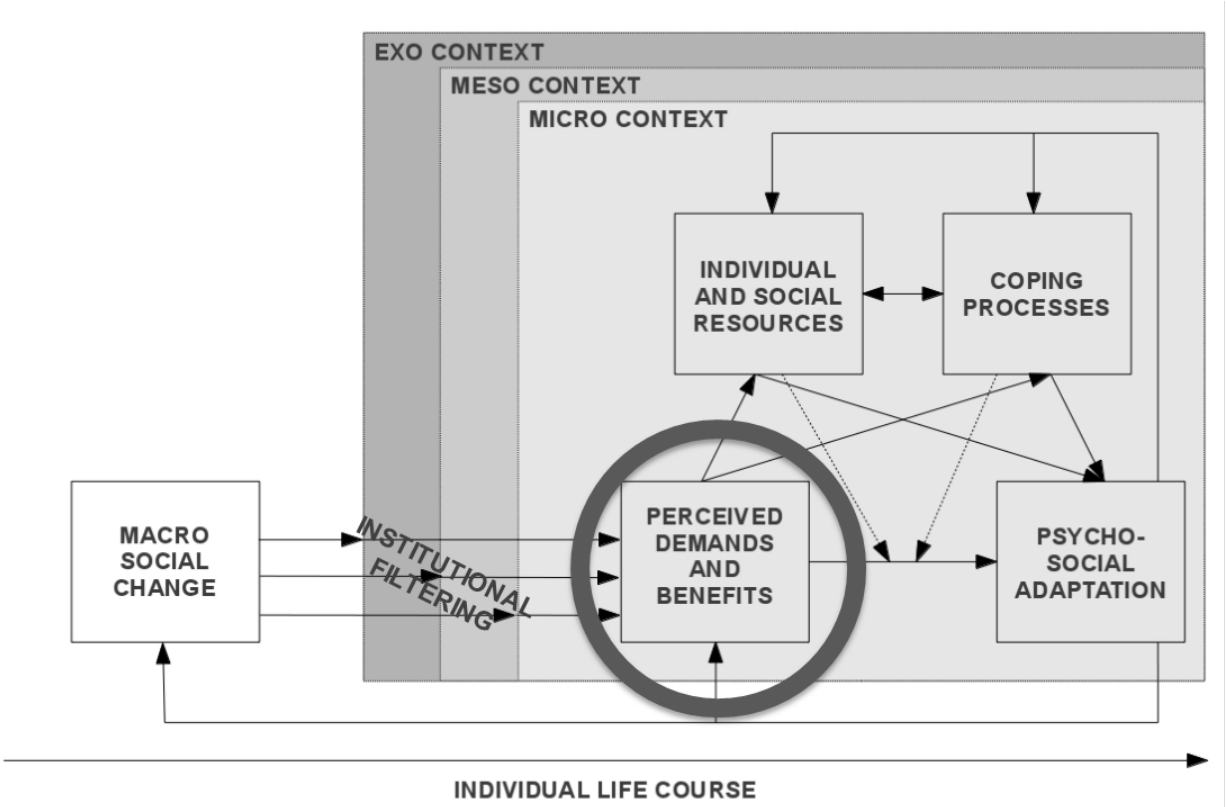
Figure 1

Jena Model of Social Change and Human Development. Adapted from Tomasik, M. J. and Silbereisen, R. K. (2014). Negotiating the demands of active ageing: Longitudinal findings from Germany. *Ageing and Society*, *34*, 790-819.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