

CHAPTER 3

Stratified Incentives and Life Course Behaviors

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INTRODUCTION

Psychologists have observed that American adolescents often have difficulty committing themselves to efforts either in school or in other activities (Erikson, 1963; Keniston, 1970). While Erikson and Keniston recognize that this lack of commitment arises due to psychological, interpersonal, cultural, economic, and social factors, psychologists usually focus on intrapsychic processes. For instance, a textbook identifies “identity disorder” as one source of low achievement in late adolescence, recommends psychotherapeutic techniques to address the internal disorder, and does not even consider the possible influence of external social context on these behaviors (Mandel & Marcus, 1988, p. 299). Another psychologist says that adolescents lack “career maturity,” which makes them unwilling to work hard in school for the sake of their future careers (Crites, 1976). Psychologists are not the only ones to make such inferences. In the 1980s, labor economists sometimes explained youths’ job turnover by saying that some youth are unstable and immature (Osterman, 1980). Practitioners often make such inferences. In interviews in the 1990s, we have heard high school teachers and counselors say that adolescents are “present oriented,” cannot defer gratification, and will not work hard in school for future benefits. One guidance counselor reported, “these kids cannot plan beyond next Saturday night’s date.” In many of these accounts, the problem is inside students, and it comes from the adolescent life stage. These interpretations rarely mention social context.

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Lifespan theorists are divided about the influence of social context in the life course. Dannefer (1992) identified four ways that social context has been conceptualized in life course research.

1. *Functionally unimportant.* Some theorists have proposed models in which social context is largely irrelevant. For example, although Levinson et al. (1978) pay lip service to the important influence of social context, they describe stages and sequences of adult development that are universal across cultures and historical periods. They even assert that age timetables exist which do not vary across different contexts. As a result, context is in effect irrelevant and adult development stages are “not subject to environmental shaping except at the pathological extremes” (Dannefer, 1992, p. 86).

2. *Powerful, but random.* Other theorists suggest that social context has large influences, but its effects are random. For instance, Baltes contends that the life course is affected by non-normative influences, “determinants that, although significant in their effect on individual life histories, are not general. They do not occur for everyone nor do they necessarily occur in easily discernible and invariant sequences or patterns” (Baltes, 1983, p. 95). In this formulation, “non-normative influences include migration, career changes, unemployment, divorce, and ‘unexpected’ changes in health” (Dannefer, 1992, p. 87). When psychologists view individuals in a therapeutic session or in a university laboratory, the influence of context may seem random. Although psychologists may view these events as unexplained by their models, Dannefer (1992, p. 87) suggests that they are not “inexplicable in their origins when viewed from other perspectives, such as sociology or epidemiology.”

3. *Organized, but static.* Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides extensive discussion of contextual influences on development at the micro-, meso-, macro-, and exo-systems levels. He stresses the importance of looking at settings and environments, which may be damaging to the child under certain conditions. He emphasizes the interaction of levels, the ways that interpersonal supports affect individuals’ coping with new organizations. Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Magnusson and Allen (1983) have provided descriptive topologies of various aspects of social context, but they tend to miss the dynamic aspects, and they do not explain the process of change of direction or trend. Generalities can be inferred based on observations, but they have an ad hoc character, without suggesting an underlying mechanism. Prediction is possible based on prior observations of existing trends, but the behavioral consequences of policies that represent radical changes are not included in these analyses.

4. *Systematically organized and dynamic.* In this view, context is viewed as “not only a powerful organizer of individual developmental patterns, but also as consisting of processes that are themselves organized: self-generating and self-perpetuating in systematic ways” (Dannefer, 1992, p. 91). Some prior work has incorporated this perspective. “Within the systems conception, context shifts from the status of a static independent variable to a structured, interactive set of relations. Human development, then, is not just influenced by environment but is caught in these extended networks of relations, which systematically provide messages about what developmental outcomes are to be valued, and which supply specific, and sometimes limited, resources for development to individuals” (Dannefer, 1992, p. 91).

This fourth level poses a difficult challenge. While empirical analyses can describe the correspondence between social policy and observable behaviors, it is difficult to discern underlying social processes and mechanisms which create the correspondence. Moreover, under most circumstances, the researcher is observing social processes that are not changing or are changing very slowly, so the cause of behavioral change is difficult to attribute to specific social actions.

Indeed, at a more basic level, it is even difficult to comprehend the distinctive qualities of social policies and individual behaviors in a single context. The impact of social policies is best seen in comparative perspective. "International comparisons challenge our assumptions about what is universal, natural, and inevitable. Looking at another country's customs and institutions puts our own in a new light, extending our vision of what is possible and desirable" (Hamilton, 1986).

Although the study of American adolescents comes in the context of American society, a different society might show different patterns. In addition, there is a great deal of stratification within societies, and adolescents at different strata may face different circumstances and respond differently. Moreover, if society radically changed over a relatively short time span, then adolescent behaviors within that society might also change in ways observable to research.

DO ADOLESCENT EFFORTS CHANGE WHEN SOCIAL CONTEXT CHANGES THEIR INCENTIVES?

This chapter seeks to understand the determinants of adolescents' school efforts by examining the recent reforms of the social context in Japan. During the period under study, Japanese society underwent dramatic reforms in a relatively short period of time, radically changing students' incentives for school effort. This study focuses on the ways these reforms affected students' incentives, the ways that students' school efforts changed over this time period, and the differential pattern of changes for different groups of students.

In addition, like Dannefer's fourth model, we argue that these adolescent behaviors could arise from properties of social context. We find that the above-noted problem of adolescent underachievement is largely absent in pre-reform Japan, but it appears after a change of social context created by drastic reforms.

We present a new model. The stratified-incentive model contends that societal institutions create patterns of incentives that affect adolescents' behaviors, and different positions in a school social hierarchy offer different incentives to the individuals in these different positions. Many commonly observed properties of the adolescent life stage could be explained as the result of the incentives offered by societal institutions like colleges and the labor market. Differences in adolescents' behaviors could be explained by the incentive structure of the institutions for which they are being prepared, and may not be due to individual attributes (Rosenbaum, 1991).

Specifically, we contend that youths with different levels of school achievement are directed to different societal goals (colleges or jobs), and the college and job structure of society defines the incentives for high school youth. While adolescents appear to differ in internal motivation, youth who face contexts which offer high incentives will see reasons to exert effort, they will have many experiences of exerting effort, and they may develop more capacity to exert effort. In contrast, youth who face low incentives will exert little effort and have little reason to develop motivational capacity.

Moreover, these various college and job goals can pose high or low incentives, depending on social context, and social policies that change the social context can also change the incentives for these goals. Unlike United States, pre-reform Japan created a context where all students had strong incentives for effort to attain their goals. More recently, Japan's reforms created a situation more like that in the United States, such that those who aspire to selective



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