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Adolescent Future Orientation: An Integrated Cultural and Ecological Perspective

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Adolescent Future Orientation: An Integrated Cultural and Ecological Perspective

Abstract

Future orientation, or the image individuals have of the future, provides the grounds for setting goals and planning, and therefore is considered an important adolescent developmental task. This chapter introduces future orientation research by describing its evolvement from a thematic approach focusing on the content of future domains to a model consisting of three components, discusses its universal and cross-cultural meanings, and reports a replicated finding that across cultures, adolescents share a common core of future orientation domains consisting of education, career, and marriage and family. Based on findings on effects of the family setting on future orientation and an integration of developmental ecology, developmental niche, and bridging multiple worlds models, the author suggests new directions for research especially pertinent for adolescents undergoing social change.

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Introduction

There are three objectives for this chapter: To introduce issues of adolescent future orientation by a summary of existing conceptualizations and supportive data, to underline the universal and cross-cultural meanings of future orientation, and to propose new research directions. These will be derived from Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) ecological model of development, Super and Harkness' (2002) proposition of regulation of the developmental niche pertaining to congruence within and across developmental settings, and Cooper and Denner's (1998) model of bridging multiple worlds.

Future Orientation

Future orientation is the image individuals have regarding their future, as consciously represented and self-reported. Like autobiography, it tells a personal subjective life story consisting of those life domains individuals deem important, and gives meaning to one's life. Its importance for individuals' motivation and self-definition has been acknowledged by both psychologists (e.g., Bandura, 2001) and laypersons, as attested by the frequent use of future metaphors for promoting both commercial and public interests. "Don't wait for the future-go find it", "Where there is care there is future", "You never actually own a Pateck Phillipe [a Swiss made watch], you merely look after it for the next generation", and "The future isn't something you travel to, it's something you build up" are just several instances of the use of future metaphors in advertisement.

As in other areas of scientific inquiry, researchers have used different terms (e.g., future time orientation, future time perspective, possible selves) to refer to phenomena similar to those I present here. Others have used "future orientation" to describe other non-thematic aspects of future-related issues, especially pertaining to extension (i.e., how far into the future individuals think) and attitudes toward the future.

Future orientation is a person's 'model of the future'. As such, it provides the grounds for setting goals, planning, exploring options and making commitments, and consequently guides the person's developmental course (Bandura, 2001; Nurmi, 1991; Seginer, 2003; Trommsdorff, 1983). Bearing these properties, future orientation has a special importance for individuals going through developmental and transitional periods in which they are normatively expected to prepare themselves for what lies ahead. Therefore, the study of future orientation is especially relevant to adolescent development, on whom much of the future orientation research has been carried out, but also to other developmental transitions associated with marriage, parenthood, retirement and bereavement, and such life transitions as immigration.

Early Psychological Analyses

Contemporary conceptualizations of future orientation can be traced back to early work of three psychologists: Frank (1939), Israeli (1930, 1936) and Lewin (1939, 1948). Their analyses addressed the conceptualization of future orientation as well as its motivational

and developmental functions, especially addressing three issues: (a) Future orientation, or the construction of possible events and experiences in the future, is generated in the present, (b) Future orientation is domain specific and individuals construct their images of the future by relating to different domains, and (c) The content (themes) of these domains may be personal or social, realistic or ideal, and reality-based or fantastic.

Using different terms, Frank, Israeli, and Lewin considered the motivational power of future orientation as directing and regulating present behavior. However, while Frank and Israeli's analyses of the regulating function of future orientation were theoretical, Lewin (1948) tested his propositions in experiments linking level of aspiration to performance and in qualitative analysis linking future orientation to morale.

Developmental issues, central to this chapter, were discussed by Frank and Lewin. While influenced by Lewin regarding the representation of the future in the life-space, Frank emphasized early development. His main argument was that regulation of physiological functions marks the onset of "human career" whose two essential characteristics are the acceptance of values and the consideration of future consequences (i.e., time perspective). For Lewin, development is marked by an increase in "...the scope of time ahead" (1939, p. 879), especially noted during adolescence.

Finally, it is important to note the pioneering empirical work of Israeli, who experimented with divergent methods ranging from estimates of future events (e.g., divorce rate) to hypnotic imagination of the future. Also included were the subjective importance of the future relative to the past and present, judgment of future criticism of the past, and the future autobiography. The latter was an elaborate method in which participants were instructed to write their autobiographies by looking back from 1935 to 1932 through 1975 to 1970. While Israeli may have inspired a simpler version of the future autobiography method (e.g., Gillespie & Allport, 1955), his elaborate methods were never replicated.

Future Orientation Research: From Classification to Process

Much of future orientation research conducted in the last 50 years focused on the thematic (content) aspects of future orientation, by classifying (coding) the narratives into various life domains, and hence can be described as ***the thematic approach*** to future orientation (Seginer, 2003). Data collected by means of open-ended methods (e.g., Trommsdorff, 1983) across different cultural settings revealed that, in constructing their future adolescents, use a common set of prospective life domains.

Specifically, adolescents from different nationalities and ethnicities shared a core of three future life domains: education, career, and family. In addition, adolescents include an atemporal domain reflecting concerns with the self (e.g., "to be happy"). Group differences related to the relative representation (density) of the core domains as well as to the representation of culture-specific domains (e.g., family of origin and collective issues for Israeli Arab and Druze, leisure for Finnish and German adolescents). These future life domains are subsumed under two overarching categories: the education, career, and family domains are subsumed under the ***Prospective Life Course*** and the self concerns

(as well as leisure, others, collective issues) under the ***Exist*** domains (Seginer & Halabi-Kheir, 1998).

A central proposition of this analysis is that the two overarching categories serve different developmental functions. The Prospective Life Course is task-oriented and self-guiding, whereas the Exist, and especially the self concerns, addresses non-specific experiences, mood and emotions (e.g., "that I will have good/prosperous life") and lacks self-guiding. Bandura's comment regarding goals is applicable here too:

> Goals do not automatically activate the self-influences that govern motivation and action...General goals are too indefinite and noncommitting (italics added) to serve as guides and incentives (2001, p.8).

To reiterate, not all future life domains have the self-directional qualities attributed to future orientation. Consequently, it is not just any form of thinking about the future that is facilitating development, but one of specific nature. Two kinds of data substantiate the different nature of the Prospective Life Course and Exist domains: across group comparisons of Israeli Jewish (kibbutz and urban), Arab, and Druze adolescents, and across-age (from 4th grade to transition-to-adulthood Israelis) intra-personal correlates of future orientation.

Data collected in Israel since the mid-80s showed that Arab and Druze adolescents scored relatively lower than the Jewish adolescents on the Prospective Life Course domains and higher on the Exist domains. While with time, the differences between the three groups grew smaller, the overall tendency stayed stable. Similar across time trends were found for Jewish kibbutz adolescents (Seginer & Schlesinger, 1998). While initially, Kibbutz adolescents scored lower than urban adolescents on Prospective Life Course domains, as the kibbutz underwent social and economic changes toward the adoption of a market economy, the tendency of kibbutz adolescents to construct their future orientation in terms of Prospective Life Course domains increased.

As different as Israeli Arab, Druze, and kibbutz adolescents have been, their construction of future orientation could be explained by the same underlying principle: the least necessary expenditure (Heckhausen, 1977). This cognitive-motivational principle concerns the relationship between task difficulty and exerted effort. Applied to future orientation it suggests that adolescents will invest in the construction of the future to the extent they perceive outcomes as contingent upon investment. Arab and Druze adolescents grow up in a setting that offers only limited freedom for an independent search for a future course. Kibbutz adolescents –u ntil the social changes of a decade ago – grew up in a setting where all options were open to them, and regardless of investing in the construction of a Prospective Life Course, their future as 'Kibbutz members' was guaranteed. Thus, for different reasons, the Arab and the Druze as well as the kibbutz adolescents had a reduced incentive to invest in developing a prospective life course.

The second set of data (Seginer, 2003) consisted of measures of future orientation and intra-personal characteristics collected from several groups of Israeli youths ranging in age from pre-adolescence to young adulthood. Analyses showed that across the different

age groups, the Prospective Life Course was positively and the Exist domains were negatively related to self esteem, self concept, academic optimism, low loneliness, and intimacy. Thus, the Prospective Life Course domains not only share a common element of task orientation, but are also related to several indicators of emotional health.

As in any other area of study, classification is not enough. Aware of the narrowness of an approach consisting only of the cognitive representation of the future, and drawing on earlier theoretical analyses (Nurmi, 1991; Nuttin & Lens, 1985; Trommsdorff, 1983), Seginer, Nurmi and Poole constructed a three-component model (Seginer, 2003) pertaining to the motivational, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of future orientation. This model is ***generic*** (i.e., applies to different life domains) and hierarchical. Its hierarchical nature draws especially on the pivotal function of the motivational component as directly affecting the cognitive component, and both directly and indirectly – via the cognitive component – the behavioral component.

The ***motivational*** component consists of four variables: the ***value*** of a prospective life domain; ***expectance*** (i.e., subjective probability) of materializing plans, attribution of internal ***control*** beliefs (ability and effort) regarding materialization of plans, and positive ***affect*** toward domain-related issues. The ***cognitive*** component consists of domain representations, in terms of hopes and fears (e.g., for Higher Education: "To be accepted to the Psychology Program"). The ***behavioral*** component consists of two variables: ***exploration*** of future options by seeking advice, gathering information, and probing their suitability, and ***commitment*** to one specific option. Their similarity to Marcia's (1993) identity model indicates the theoretical affinity between future orientation and ego identity. However, the present conceptualization of future orientation suggests that while longitudinally future orientation and identity formation affect each other, during adolescence and the transition to adulthood period, future orientation precedes the work of identity.

Universal and Contextual Considerations

Future orientation, like the behavioral manifestations of other value orientations, is the outcome of both universal and culture-specific processes. Its universality draws on the three assumptions underlying Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) seminal analysis of value orientations: (a) humans have a limited number of common problems, (b) solutions to these problems have a limited range, and (c) " ... all alternatives of all solutions are present in all societies at all times but are differentially preferred." (p. 10).

Since all societies share a concern for continuity and for the welfare of future generations, future orientated thinking, facilitated by humans' abstract thinking, is universal. The Kenyan proverb "Treat the earth well, it was not given to you by your parents it was loaned to you by your children" is but one example of future oriented thinking in traditional societies. Human groups differ, however, in their ***preference*** of the past, present or future, and more pertinent to the present analysis, in the extent to which they permit members of their society, and adolescents and transition to adulthood

individuals in particular, to independently chart their future and use it to guide their behavior.

This permission, and in some groups encouragement, characterizes Western societies. It emanates from cultural emphasis on individual autonomy and its direct bearing on Western views of adolescence as a period for age-appropriate pursuit of autonomy and preparation for the future. In constructing their future orientation, Western adolescents enjoy concerted multiple sources of support for the development of future orientation. At the societal-cultural level it is sanctioned by the high value Western cultures have for autonomy and the future, and made concrete by pertinent information and the availability of role models provided by the media and by immediate settings such as the family, the peer group, and the school. The importance of such across-system regularity for developmental outcomes has been recently described by Super and Harkness (2002) in terms of three mechanisms that organize the developmental niche: redundancy, elaboration, and chaining.

The availability and regularity of these resources for Western adolescents underscores the difficulties encountered by adolescents from the majority world (Kagitcibasi, 1996), whose societies have been undergoing a gradual cultural change. Under conditions of social change, adolescents may strive for more Western adulthood than accorded by their society. This creates difficulties for both: from the society's point of view, cultural reproduction (i.e., continuity) is threatened, and from the point of view of individual adolescents, the concerted multi-source support, or developmental niche regularity (Super & Harkness, 2002), is missing.

Thus far, the discussion focused mainly on one aspect of the social context: cultural values and practices. This, however, leaves out other aspects of the developmental setting that both mediate the effects of cultural values and gradually affect them. Toward this aim, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) analysis of the ecology of human development – describing the environment as consisting of several ecological sub-systems – will be employed.

The Ecological System: A Context for the Construction of Future Orientation

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of the ecology of human development consists of four concentric ecological subsystems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem, as well as the chronosystem (i.e., the time dimension inherent in the concept of development, Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Its importance draws from turning the environment from 'background' to 'figure' and emphasizing the significance of distal settings such as the parents' workplace or friends' families (exosystem) to child development.

Bronfenbrenner described the microsystem as "... a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics." (1979, p. 22). Families, classrooms, peers groups, children's and adolescents' meeting places, churches, clubs, and community centers are all microsystems. By being arenas for academic, social and cultural learning, microsystems provide their members with social capital (Coleman, 1990). These social

settings ...facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure...making possible the achievement of certain ends, that would not be attainable in its [the social capital] absence. (Coleman, 1990, p. 302).

The second subsystem – the mesosystem – ***links*** between the developing person's microsystems. The relationships among the family, school, peer group, or any two of them are the child's mesosystem. Given that mesosystems consist of relationships and may function to facilitate development, they too provide the child with social capital.

The exosystem's relevance to the child's behavior emanates from the basic fact that individuals share microsystems but also participate in other microsystems. To illustrate, parents and adolescents share the family microsystem, but the parent's workplace is the parent's but not the adolescent's microsystem. Another example is families of members of the adolescent's peer group. Thus, the exosystem is a microsystem that includes one or more members of one of the child's microsystems such as parents, siblings, friends, or teachers. To the extent that it provides its members social capital, it may also be an asset for the child's development. Altogether, its impact on the child is an indirect one, mediated by that other person.

The macrosystem pertains to social and cultural consistencies such as values, norms and customs that act as blueprints for microsystems and mesosystems. Thus, the microsystem and the exosystem are social settings, the mesosystem is the relationships between settings and the macrosystem is a set of abstract rules emanating from values and ideologies that regulates the micro-, meso- and exosystems. Finally, the chronosystem relates to the cumulative experiences of the child in relation to processes and events occurring in her or his setting, as well as the historical period in which the development under examination takes place.

While contemporary future orientation research endorses the development-in-context approach, as yet only few studies have examined it in the context of microsystems like the family, peer group, or the school, the effects of the interface between microsystems (mesosystem), and the ways in which the construction of future orientation in microsystemic contexts is indirectly affected by the macro- and exosystems. Therefore, a brief summary of existing research on the development of future orientation in family contexts will be followed by a section specifying directions for future research, as they relate to the construction of future orientation in context.

Summary of Existing Research

Cumulative knowledge since the early decades of the 20th century on the development of children and adolescents in family contexts has indicated that the question is not whether but rather how families affect adolescent future orientation. Based on existing research, three avenues of influence can be identified. The first is parents' resources, instantiated in their level of education and other indicators of socio economic status (Cooper, Cooper, Azmitia, Chavira, & Gullatt, 1998). Research (e.g., Trommsdorff, 1983) showed that in constructing their future orientation adolescents reproduced family social status. This tendency may have been reinforced, however, by tracking lower class adolescents to

lower-level high schools rather than to the academically oriented gymnasiums. The two other channels through which families were found to affect adolescent future orientation pertain to authoritative parenting and parental beliefs (Seginer, 2003).

Authoritative parenting can facilitate the construction of future orientation in two ways: Directly, by providing autonomy that, as discussed earlier, is a necessary condition for constructing an instrumental image of future orientation, and indirectly by prompting emotional health reflected in having sufficient psychological resources for simultaneously attending to present affairs and orienting themselves to the future. Analysis of data collected from Israeli Jewish adolescents showed that parental authoritativeness affected the motivational component of future orientation only indirectly via self esteem (an indicator of emotional health).

The second channel is ***parental beliefs***. While developmental psychology research has been focusing on parents' ideas of children and parenting in general, beliefs parents have regarding their child are as pertinent. Both guide parental practices and the expectations parents communicate to their children, and thus may have a similar effect on the motivational component of adolescent future orientation. Data collected from Israeli Jewish adolescents and their parents (Seginer, 2003) showed parental beliefs, like authoritative parental style, had direct effect on the motivational component of future orientation only in one domain: military service. These findings should be considered in relation to two facts: (a) respondents were only one year from their military service and hence it was in their immediate future more than higher education, career or marriage and family, and (b) the developmental meaning of universal conscription for Israeli youth.

In a second study, the relationships between parental beliefs and future orientation was conducted among 11th grade Israeli Arab girls and focused on two prospective domains: education and marriage. The analysis showed that fathers' perceived beliefs prompted two trajectories. One was the ***traditional*** trajectory of early commitment to marriage, which in turn reduced the value and expectance of higher education and was indirectly associated with lower academic achievement. The second was the ***progressive*** trajectory, in which the traditional and the progressive were both represented. It positively linked perceived fathers' beliefs regarding education and girls' academic achievement via marriage and higher education expectance (i.e., subjective probability of materialization of plans).

In sum, based on these findings a preliminary answer to the question of how parents affect future orientation is that (a) parents affect the construction of future orientation in multiple ways, and (b) parenting style and parental beliefs may be especially pertinent for prompting the motivational aspects of future orientation. It is also clear, however, that this answer is tentative and partial. To advance our knowledge of the construction of future orientation, these findings need to be replicated and additional research directions need to be pursued.

Directions for Future Research

The interface between a future orientation conceptualization consisting of three components and the ecological model of development consisting of several immediate settings such as the family, peer group, and school (microsystems) that are embedded in other subsystems, must result in a wealth of questions for future research. Of these, I will present three questions, especially pertinent for cross-cultural psychology.

All three address the correspondence among different aspects of the developmental niche (i.e., those aspects of the environment relevant to development) whose importance for successful developmental outcomes has been highlighted by Super and Harkness (2002) and discussed in an earlier section. Its application to the ecological model of development prompts two related issues: one concerns congruence among the various parts of the ecological developmental system and the other concerns developmental systems lacking such congruence. The first addresses the correspondence among the different microsystems, and indirectly with the other systems. These include the active cooperation between microsystems (mesosystem), the social capital provided to microsystems' members participating in non-shared microsystems like parents' workplace, siblings' friends, or friends' families (exosystem), and the overall support of the value system.

While at first glance, by replacing congruence with incongruence, the second issue is just a mirror image of the first, in reality they are not simply opposites. Instead, they should be understood in light of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) rule that to understand the impact of the environment on behavior it is necessary to introduce a contrived change (experimental manipulation) or observe the occurrence of a "natural" change (i.e., social change). So viewed, issues of across-settings congruence can be addressed only by examining settings with varying degrees of incongruence. Such conditions are often found in minority and immigration groups as well as in the majority world (Kagitcibaci, 1996) where adolescents strive for education and its consequent life style.

Hence, the first question is how does parent/school, or peer/school congruence facilitate the construction of future orientation? The second question, following from the first, is how do specific settings change each other (as may be the case in a family-school mesosystem) or moderate the effect of one of them (as may be the case of an educational program counteracting the effects of the peer group) on the construction of future orientation? The third question focuses on bridging multiple (i.e., incongruent) worlds (Cooper & Denner, 1998) by actively negotiating adolescents and its outcomes in terms of the construction of future orientation.

Empirical examination of these questions will serve two purposes. First, it will advance our knowledge of how culture-specific conditions facilitate the construction of future orientation by adolescents undergoing different kinds of social change. Second, as such analyses accumulate, they will provide an understanding of culture-specific as well as across cultures principles underlying the effects of single settings and the extent to which congruence between (or among) settings affect the construction of adolescent future orientation.

In conclusion, this analysis addressed adolescent future orientation in light of its universal origins and the facilitation of its construction in different ecological settings. Underlying this discussion has been a replicated finding that adolescents share a common core of future orientation domains consisting of education, career, and marriage and family, but differ in the extent to which they invest in each of these domains, and include in their future orientation other culture-specific domains. Cultural differences pertaining to congruence among various developmental settings prompted three issues for further research.

While these issues focus on individuals, they raise additional question focusing on cultures: do similar across cultures strivings for more education and higher standard of living threaten cultural uniqueness? Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) contended that ...the ideas and techniques a people either 'borrow from' or have 'forced upon' them by another culture are far more often adapted to the old ways of thinking and acting than they are disruptive of those ways." (p. 9). Thus, as adolescents across different cultural groups may become more similar, and hence develop greater inter-cultural understanding, they and the adults they will develop to be will most probably preserve cultural uniqueness.

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Questions for Discussion

1. How does current knowledge on future orientation differ from Frank, Israeli, and Lewin's early work on future orientation? Please address issues related to conceptualizations, research methods and design, and findings.

2. Based on your experience, observation of others, or reading please describe instances indicating the effect of a microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem or macrosystem on the construction of future orientation?
3. Based on your reading of this chapter, please suggest a research question or hypothesis.
4. After reading this chapter, you have been requested to submit an outline for an educational program for promoting adolescent future orientation. Who will be your target persons? What will be the theoretical and empirical basis for your suggested program?
5. Can you suggest a proverb, saying or an advertising phrase you are familiar with that uses future metaphors?