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Psychological Challenges of Unification – Selected Results and Thoughts on Korea

*Rainer K. Silbereisen**

Abstract: »Psychologische Herausforderungen einer Politischen Vereinigung – Ausgewählte Ergebnisse und Anregungen für Korea«. A number of early warning signs for the break-down of a political system like North Korea are presented, inspired by recent research in psychological science. Taking post-unification Germany as an exemplary case, the times soon after the turnabout and the mid2000s are considered in light of our own research. The focus is on the new challenges people were confronted with, which resources helped them to cope with strain and stress, and what all this meant for well-being. Concerning the 1990s, key drivers of behavior and its change were the changed institutions that resulted in rather quick adaptation to the new rules. Nevertheless, personal resources such as self-efficacy, gained under the old system, made a difference. In the 2000s, it was the uncertainties about life planning, rooted in the unification aftermath and effects of globalization and economic jeopardy, which shaped behavior. When confronted with challenges, people typically responded by active engagement, and if supported by internal control beliefs this helped to protect well-being in spite of the difficult situation. Under especially dire circumstances, however, disengagement was positive because it spares resources for alternative action. For the situation on the Korean Peninsula the German research results made plausible that policy interventions can use many entry points in the system of coping with social change, from opportunities to personal skills, to ease the challenges of living in a new country. Further, it demonstrates that a unification scenario inspired by the German model would require acculturation in both parts of the country, not only in the North. And finally, one has to consider lasting deficiencies in crucial agency factors due to growing up in an environment characterized by scarcity of adequate living conditions for large segments of the population.

Keywords: German unification, political system change, challenges and demands, coping, role of opportunities and personal resources, young people, policy advice.

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1. Introduction¹

The question posed in this paper concerns what one can learn from research on German unification for the possible unification of the two Koreas (North, South). We refer to two lines of psychological research on youth and adults (up to 45 years of age) that were performed in the years following unification in 1989 up to the mid-2000s. The aim was to understand the relationship between changes on the aggregate level of society and the behavior of people in this age range, especially in the former East of the country. The time from adolescence to young adulthood is of particular relevance because these age groups are known to be more flexible when facing social change compared to older people. We confirmed this notion of “impressionable years” (Krosnick and Alwin 1989) for the German situation by using period comparisons on basic value orientations over five years after the early 1990s. More specifically, the group of those aged 15 to 19 years and 20 to 24 years exhibited a remarkable reduction of the difference in values between the East and West of the country, whereas the group of those aged 25 to 29 years that had spent a decade or more working in the old system showed no difference at all. This convergence of basic value orientations, such as collectivism and individualism, among the younger groups mainly occurred in the former communist East, and it could be identified as due to an increase in individualistic orientations, the hallmark of the West (Reitzle and Silbereisen 2000a). Consequently, when thinking about possible political changes on the Korean Peninsula, paying special attention to our insights on young people under the influence of German unification seems justified.

The question remains regarding whether German unification can at all constitute a worthwhile experience when examining likely scenarios for Korea more than 20 years later, in a changed geopolitical situation and with extant cultural differences. Moreover, how unification was accomplished may be a unique case that cannot be easily generalized. It is worth noting that the background for the German model of unification, broadly considered, was the belief in a gap compared to the West in technological modernization and related governance organization. Consequently, the transformation mode was that of a shock-wise change to the social market economy and representative democracy with its many institutions, all orchestrated politically as *Beitritt* (accession) of the former East Germany to the Federal Republic of Germany (Zapf 1996), and supported by a strong pro-unification movement among the population in the East. Taking this as a blueprint for a potential Korean unification is only one of many possible scenarios. When reporting potentially relevant psychological insights in this paper, we have to keep this proposition always in mind. However, we believe that the results of unification-induced behavioral change that

¹ I want to thank Michael Fritsch for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

we investigate can be applied to a range of political transitions and transformations and, when considered with caution, do indeed have relevance for Korea. One should not overlook, however, that the German model was problematic in many major respects, e.g., the changes in the economy resulted in tremendous unemployment rates in the East, and the *Angeleichung* (alignment) of life circumstances due to the transfer of Western institutions, even decades after unification, has still not been fully accomplished (Adler 2002).

2. Characteristics of Societal Change and Psychological Conditions

Research on German unification is susceptible to a number of misconceptions about the influence of communism in the East, since knowledge of and access to the former East Germany was limited for so many years. Moreover, because the former East Germany was much less isolated and secretive than North Korea, some of these comparisons may be rejected by Korean political actors in their context. In addition, psychological thinking regarding the causes of social revolutions, such as in Germany and elsewhere, will be mentioned because it identifies specificities and commonalities with the possible Korean situation of system change in the North.

2.1 Incorrect Assertions that Miscalculate Political Action

The first incorrect assertion was the belief that, due to the desperate economic situation compared to the West of Germany, the one-sided political domination of many spheres of life and the environmental degradation due to outdated industrial plants, people suffered in their health and well-being, in general. More specifically, due to permanent “patronizing” by the authorities, they would exhibit low levels of self-efficacy, i.e., demonstrate little belief in their capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations. In other words, they would be unable to exercise agency, with consequences for numerous important spheres of life, including health (Bandura 1995). However, this was not at all the case – contrary insights into widespread human resilience were overlooked (Bonanno 2008). In particular, a common split in many peoples’ minds was not recognized, between ritualized behavior in public life with little personal control, and behavior in the reclusive private domain, with its many opportunities for successful self-efficacy promoting activities. It is plausible that North Korea may not be too different. Nevertheless, it must be taken into account that the mass privatization characteristic of many post-communist countries is known to increase mortality rates, especially when people lack social capital (Stuckler, King and McKee 2009). In addition, the North Korean population will have suffered from the many

economic hardships and associated ailments that are known to affect psychosocial development of the next generation (Heberle and Carter 2015).

The second incorrect assertion was the belief that differences between the two former countries were due to the different political regimes. In actuality, some dissimilarities, such as the divergence in marriage and cohabitation patterns, represented old religious differences that had emerged over centuries. Moreover, the different responses to economic incentives across regions of the East were rooted in long-standing business traditions predating communism (Fritsch and Wyrwich 2014). The confrontation between the agrarian population in large parts of North Korea and the post-modern industrial population in the South during a process of political reconciliation may also highlight similar hidden traditions that should not be categorized as part of the communist legacy.

The third incorrect assumption was that German unification would result in a quick alignment of living circumstances. This view ignored the fact that the mode of unification showed resemblances to migration, not of people, but of social institutions. Nevertheless, with this analogy in mind, any expectation of a quick and broad assimilation to the Western mold is unrealistic. On the one hand, as in real migration situations, it may take more than a generation to change culturally rooted behaviours beyond the pragmatics of everyday life that change quickly. On the other hand, people are not homogenous in their response to social change. For example, some groups may have been open to change already, and may acculturate smoothly when confronted with a flexible political transformation regime that acknowledges their prior life and achievements. In contrast, other people may already be skeptical of changes and, when confronted with a new system rigidly insisting on adherence to the new order and disregarding past achievements, may resist. Actually, the notions of the rigidity-flexibility of the system and the openness-resistance to change among people form a four-fold matrix, with more prototypical groups to be distinguished (Best 2007; Schmidt 2010). Overall, the political management of social change needs to acknowledge group differences and adjust to their needs. It is clear that Korea will possess its own particularities in this regard.

2.2 Psychological Concepts Regarding the Causes of Political Transitions

What does psychology have to say about the causes of social change, and how much can it tell us about the Korean situation and, in particular, the role of youth? There are certainly many approaches from other sciences that attempt to elucidate why and how a revolution gains momentum. However, for the emergence of the potential growth of conflict, the “system justification approach” is helpful. As Kay and Friesen (2011) show, people in general exhibit the tendency to justify the existing political system against criticism, because it provides them with a framework of rules that provides them with a strong sense of secu-

city without requiring much mental processing. However, this only works if the system obviously has power, offers desirable career opportunities, has borders one cannot cross freely, and does not allow one to achieve control over one's personal affairs.

In the former communist East Germany, the potential for a threat to the system increased gradually due to the economic downturn and its effects on daily life. Among many other issues, the key factor was the softening-up of borders, through travel arrangements for pensioners to the West, and by some opportunities to resettle legally to the West, albeit with many bureaucratic difficulties. In addition, there was accessibility, although illicit, to Western television in most parts of the country. These factors undercut system loyalty, especially among young people, who foresaw a dim future. Political attempts at strengthening the relationship with them and their desire for Western youth culture failed – the invitation to pop stars from abroad (sometimes with ideological leanings towards the system) to assuage system-critical youth were actually seen by the public not as strength, but as another sign of the weakness of the system. An example of this is described by Kirschbaum (2013), based on files on the Bruce Springsteen concert kept by the secret police (Stasi) in the East and recovered after unification.

In a sense, this is similar to North Korea, although at a lower level of concern for the regime. There are a number of cautious reforms occurring concerning the possibly positive effect of small businesses on the supply of food. However, this constitutes little danger to the system's stability because the overall threat is high, the borders are closed, the dependency on provisions from the government is total, media from the outside are barred, and the number of refugees from the North is less than 2,000 per year (Am et al. 2012; Cho et al. 2009). In other words, there is little opportunity to gain individual self-efficacy in public life other than by serving the system. Moreover, the development of collective self-efficacy (self-efficacy beliefs shared by a social group, such as in a civil movement) is virtually impossible. Furthermore, reactance to the system, rather than system rationalization, is unlikely because there are no educated middle classes, in the Western sense, that are known to have formed or support humanitarian movements (Laurin, Kay and Fitzsimons 2012). The total blockage of news from the outside is incomplete, however, particularly due to illegal CD trade of South Korean entertainment programs through the Chinese border to North Korea.

At this point, a note on psychological research addressing the situation in North Korea is in order. The simple answer is – there is not much. A systematic search in the comprehensive data archive Psycinfo resulted in about 110 entries, many representing empirical studies. There were a few distinct topics among them. First, research on South Korean attitudes toward North Korea revealed an overall negative evaluation (Ha 2013). Second, there was a substantial component of research on mental health among North Korean defectors

to the South. An interesting result of a longitudinal study revealed that it was the combined effect of past trauma experienced in the North and current cultural stress (not stress due to ordinary life events) in the South that endangered mental health, but not stress during defection (Jeon, Eom and Min 2013). Third, childhood malnutrition was also a topic of research, using UNICEF data gathered in the country. It showed wide stunting (reduced growth rate) of development among children and, interestingly, this was less severe in the better supplied capital Pyongyang, with its residential concentration of the political elite (Schwekendiek 2010, 2014). Fourth, studies referred to the economic “reform from below,” meaning the promotion of small businesses. However, it had little political or economic effect (other than what might be expected based on literature on entrepreneurship), except for concerns about possibly increasing social inequality (Haggard and Noland 2010). Taken together, these kinds of studies could not contribute to the topics that are central in this chapter. Consequently, in the remainder, I report the results of my own research, always with a consideration of the Korean situation.

3. Select Research on the Effects of Social Change in Germany

As indicated by our research and in line with the extant literature, the quintessential experience of people undergoing a radical system transition and transformation are great new “uncertainties” about basically all aspects of life. For example, what does an open society mean, how should one train under the new conditions for an occupation, what is necessary to secure a consumer loan, how to choose between many competing sales options, and what is one’s identity in the new country? Such uncertainties are especially relevant when they constitute major developmental tasks of the age groups considered, such as how to establish a career or how to form a family of one’s own, i.e., tasks that most people need to resolve.

In the following, select results of two independent, but complementary, lines of research are reported. Comprehensive overviews on both have been published elsewhere, such as in Silbereisen, Reitzle and Juang (2002), and Silbereisen, Pinguart and Tomasik (2010).

The first line of research refers to the time of German unification and a few years after, i.e., into the mid-1990s. This was the period in which everything was new, and existing obstacles related directly to the recent political and economic system transformation. The case in point comprises changes of important life-course transitions in the early decades of life. The second line of research addresses the situation in the mid-2000s, when the post-unification achievements and remaining disadvantages were overshadowed by the consequences of globalization and the economic crisis that particularly affected

transforming countries all across Europe. These brought a range of new uncertainties that people had not expected to face under democratic rule, such as new economic shocks or new waves of migration. Here, I focus on how people until mid-adulthood dealt with the new challenges emerging in the broader societal context. The common denominator of the research reported is an attempt to elucidate how the manifestations of the change on the macro-level of the political and economic system likely affected individuals' behaviour and development, as well as by what means people attempted to cope with the challenges and adjust successfully. Throughout this work, hypotheses and other references to Korea are added when appropriate. Although the two research lines refer to historically different periods, when taken together, their relevance to today's Korea may be obvious.

3.1 Reorganizing Life-Course and Agency in the 1990s

The life of young people is organized by a series of developmental tasks (or biographical transitions) that are usually resolved in a sequential order. It typically starts with physical changes during puberty, then the establishment of new relations to peers and romantic contacts, followed by the initial formation of plans concerning school and occupation, and finally the transition from school to work or further education. Individuals may differ in the timing of the transitions, and the "clock" behind the timing and the variation comprises a combination of biological maturation, expectations from society, and personal aspirations (Dekovic, Noom and Meuus 1996). German unification brought with it a change of societal institutions, such as the school system and its curricula that had a major influence on education-related developmental tasks. We revealed this by comparing young people in both parts of the country, assessed in 1991, soon after unification when East German conditions were still prevalent. This work was repeated by us in 1996, with independent but equivalent samples, several years into unification, with the newly formed or reformed institutions being operational, and after the occurrence of the first shocks due to rising unemployment.

Concerning occupational development, our prediction was that, in 1991, the timing was earlier in the East due to the fact that a smaller range of occupations was available, and there was a lot of "sponsoring" by the state that encouraged people to enter particular professions that were deemed to be relevant for the economy. In 1996, however, changes in the school system had taken place, with different branches of schools (vocational, academic) dominating instead of the comprehensive form of school that was common in the former East. As expected, the timing in 1996 in the East was later than in 1991, now comparable to the West with its greater freedom of choice and more responsibility for the young. In the West, on the other hand, there was no difference between the two time periods (Silbereisen 2000), indicating that no institutional changes had taken place.

The pertinent question is whether such differences indeed reflect the pulse of unification-related changes. The answer is an unqualified “yes.” In contrast to the transitions mentioned, not surprisingly, the timing of puberty during adolescence did not differ between the periods and countries, implicitly revealing that not unexpectedly the living conditions in the East were sufficient for the requirements of the biological potential of maturation. Among young adults, we found a number of differences in transition timing, reflecting the change in the societal situation. For instance, the timing of leaving home was later in 1996 in the East, due to the fact that forming a family of one’s own no longer provided the advantage of gaining preferred access to an apartment in this country, with its highly regulated housing market (Juang, Silbereisen and Wiesner 1999). Likewise, the postponing of occupational decisions that we found among the young was reflected in a later timing of financial independence among young adults, again comparing 1991 and 1996, but only among those with a vocational, instead of an academic, background. This group was severely affected by the economic challenges (Reitzle and Silbereisen 2000b). Concerning romantic engagements, we observed no difference between the East and West in both periods. Concerning family formation, however, the timing in the East in 1996 was later than in 1991, now similar to the West. This is due to the fact that the labor market was tighter and there was less support available for childrearing in the new Germany (Juang and Silbereisen 2001).

The results reported support the view that a close relationship exists between the societal changes and the organization of the life course. Throughout all of the results, a general observation holds, i.e., those belonging to the lower stratum of education were in a more precarious situation with regard to many developmental tasks compared to the others. This is probably related to the fact that the decline of traditional industrial labor after unification largely eliminated the availability of types of employment to which they had previously been accustomed.

The fact that the timing of those life-course transitions influenced by institutional arrangements obviously differed when the countries were still separated, whereas the timing of transitions mainly under other influences, such as puberty and hormonal maturation, were alike, may indicate that the case cannot be compared fully to Korea. The deficiencies of nutrition in the North (Schwekendiek 2010, 2014) represent conditions that are known to influence the timing of puberty, although whether it is earlier or later (more likely) than otherwise is an issue of debate (Delemarre-van de Waal, van Coeverden and Engelbregt 2002).

Given that there are many intermediate contexts between changes on the aggregate level of a society and the proximate everyday behaviours and expectations of people, the relationship between levels is certainly not a direct one. This assertion is supported by the sometimes longer time that it takes for societal changes to affect individuals’ behaviour, i.e., a so-called “loose coupling” (Elder and O’Rand 1995). This view led us to attempt to identify some of the mechanisms that link the levels. In the situation soon after German unification,

many families were affected by concerns about the security of their (former) public housing at low rents, or family members had to undergo re-training because their qualifications had become obsolete. Other examples are one's or a family member's unemployment or the discontinuation of an apprenticeship. Using the example of our data on financial self-support, results for the age group of 20 to 29 years revealed that about one-third of the timing difference between 1991 and 1996 could be "explained away" by these conditions of family life. Certainly, this is not the only mechanism connecting social change and individual behaviour. In addition, although there may be different mechanisms for other biographical transitions, it reveals the relevance of unification-related changes in life-circumstances for behavioural adjustment.

What do these results on the post-unification situation mean for possible future scenarios occurring on the Korean Peninsula? It is remarkable that, in Germany, five years were enough to change the organization of the life course in areas crucial for the new societal order, such as the development of an occupational identity. Furthermore, it took people from the East more time than in earlier periods to gain independence in various sectors of life. This "moratorium" offered additional time for learning and adjustment to a situation of higher self-responsibility, and it also extended the duration of adolescence and "emerging adulthood." This period is characterized by full physical maturation, but lacks social independence. It is thus known to be prone to status offenses, meaning that people often try to achieve autonomy through peer-oriented illicit actions, such as taking psychoactive substances (Moffitt 1993). In Korea, after unification, a similar quick adaptation of major life course transitions is a likely consequence of the probable change of social institutions, including the negative side effects just mentioned.

Socio-demographic circumstances, such as age or unemployment, are not the only source of differences in individuals' responses to new challenges following a transformation of the political system. For example, a major role is played by personality differences. Of particular interest is self-efficacy, a variable that describes tendencies to believe in one's capabilities to control the results of one's own actions and to exert overall optimism in being able to deal with challenges (Bandura 1995). One can gain self-efficacy and the related self-regulatory competences by various means. The foremost one is success in overcoming obstacles through persistent efforts under one's own control, i.e., personal mastery experiences. Other means include vicarious experiences taken from social models of exercising self-efficacy, and persuasion by significant others that one has reason to believe in one's capabilities and thereby overcome self-doubts. In a communist system with overarching control by authorities over almost all aspects of life, such self-regulated mastery experiences are often achieved in the private domain only.

We were fortunate to have access to a unique longitudinal study that began at the age of 12 years in a large East German city and, after unification, was fol-

lowed-up into early adulthood. Pinquart, Silbereisen and Juang (2004) found an effect of earlier self-efficacy on post-unification life satisfaction and future optimism at age 18, itself a harbinger of life success. Furthermore, self-efficacy buffered unification-related deteriorations concerning family finances, occupational training, and leisure opportunities in their effect on life satisfaction – the relationship was less close if self-efficacy during childhood was high. In other words, self-efficacy can shield the unification-related loss of social capital from affecting future life-satisfaction, and thus constitutes a source of resilience.

What do such results imply for the debate on Korea? A probably valid view is that higher self-efficacy corresponds to greater willingness and competence to deal constructively with the individual challenges of unification affecting the North. It is important to note, however, that self-efficacy cannot last forever, i.e., it needs occasional renewals through new successes in the new system, and this requires responsible social policies that provide opportunities to exercise mastery. Obviously, low self-efficacy is not an exclusively personal problem that simply requires personal change. Rather, the social system in which people live may have impeded opportunities for the promotion of self-efficacy. Thus, in order to induce self-efficacy, change has to occur there first. Finally, one might wonder whether cultural differences between Germany and Korea preclude a generalization regarding self-efficacy and its consequences. This is not so, however, since self-efficacy plays an equivalent role in individualistic (Germany) and collectivist (Korea) cultures. In the former, it contributes to self-directedness, and in the latter it contributes to group-directedness in overcoming obstacles. The common denominator is that people attempt to achieve benefits through their own actions, whether for the individual or the social group (Bandura 1995).

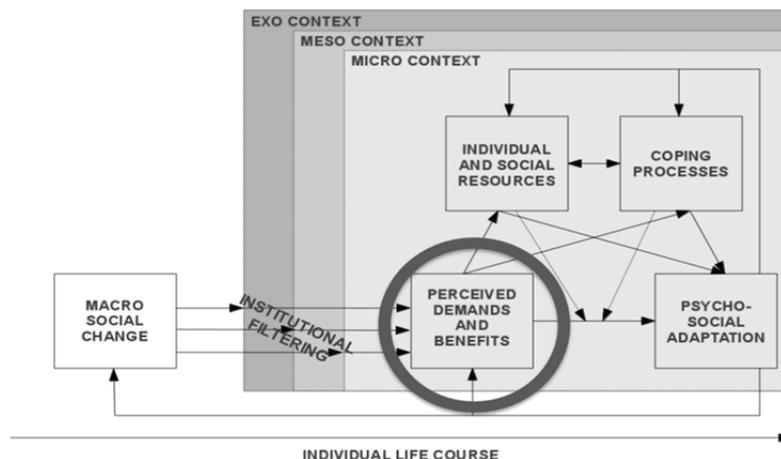
After this examination of the biographical adjustments that the young people experienced under the influence of changed social institutions during the process of German unification, and some of the most prominent psychological prerequisites, in the following, perceived uncertainties particularly affecting the domain of work and career will be discussed, and how people tried to overcome them depending on personal competences and contextual opportunities.

3.2 Dealing with the Challenges of the mid-2000s

In the first decade of the new millennium, we had the opportunity to look more closely at various uncertainties that people perceive *vis-à-vis* ongoing social change and how they deal with them. This was no longer the immediate situation after unification, but instead a time when unification had begun to settle. However, at the same time, Germany, like other transforming countries in Europe, was severely affected by the negative consequences of globalization, including the financial shocks in the middle of the decade. Large samples for East and West Germany in the age range of 15 to 45 years were gathered. In

addition, for reasons of generalization, the same design was used in collecting a sample from Poland. Our earlier research experience was instructive for a conceptual model of the research that focused on, as manifestations of social change, new demands (uncertainties) and new benefits concerning major developmental tasks in work and family. It further addresses ways of coping and the role of personal resources when dealing with the demands, and the consequences of the process on psychosocial well-being, antecedent to further positive achievements in life. As depicted in Figure 1, this Jena Model of Social Change and Human Development presumes complex direct and indirect relations between the four elements mentioned, reminiscent of psychological and sociological theories addressing how people deal with stressful encounters, rooted in changes to a deteriorated opportunity structure, such as aggravated economic hardship (Elder 1994; Conger and Donellan 2007). The Jena Model is also characterized by the assumption that all of the cognitive-motivational processes are embedded in multiple layers of ecological contexts, from the belief systems at the political superstructure over intermediate contexts represented by social institutions, to the proximal context of the neighbourhoods, and finally the micro-context of the family. The idea here is that social change “cascades down” from the societal level to the individual through altering these contexts. In this regard, the Jena Model was informed by the results of our 1990s post-unification research.

Figure 1: Jena Model of Social Change and Human Development (changed after Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2014)



Interestingly, some research addressing social change in South Korea chose a similar starting point, which is somewhat equivalent to the demands in the Jena Model. For example, Kim (2008) assessed subjective appraisals of the extent,

pace, and evaluation of (negative) change in various domains, such as politics and the economy. In contrast to our approach, however, the instances of change refer to the society at large, and not to the individual experiences of negative change, as in our case. We assessed perceived change over a period of time concerning work (labour market, work place, career development), and family (relationship stability, life's directions, ambivalence in family formation). All of the topics were chosen based on theories and facts regarding the consequence of globalization, economic change, and demographic shifts in the mid-2000s in Germany (Tomasik and Silbereisen 2009).

As the results revealed, the "load" of such demands (number of highly endorsed respective statements) was reflective of the objective situation in the region concerning official statistics, and it also identified the protection of "filters," such as employment, marriage/cohabitation and higher education, that provided more resources. Furthermore, and not surprisingly, demand loads were higher in the still less prosperous former East Germany. Moreover, longitudinal data showed that the course of demand loads across time resembled that of relevant social indicators (e.g., unemployment rates) on the aggregate level. Obviously, the demands are a subjective reflection of the larger picture in the society.

Concerning people's coping with the demands representing two major developmental tasks, following Heckhausen, Wrosch and Schulz (2010), we distinguish between engagement (actively facing challenges; rallying motivation; and, in the case of failure, alternative plans of action) and disengagement (face-saving attributions or withdrawal, perhaps for better alternatives later on). It was found that engagement was always higher than disengagement, reflecting a cultural habit in achievement-oriented societies, and that engagement was especially high in the former East of the country, probably induced by the higher demand load. This finding was in contrast to the public stereotype, and may be informative for a future scenario in Korea, as well (Tomasik, Silbereisen, Lechner and Wasilewski 2013).

Engagement helped to preserve well-being that otherwise was negatively associated with demands, i.e., the uncertainties indeed functioned as stressors, as we had expected. This effect was stronger, the more that engagement was combined with a sense of control (disengagement in the opposite way) – a result that is reminiscent of the effects of self-efficacy in the 1990s (Gruemer, Silbereisen and Heckhausen 2013; Koerner, Silbereisen and Cantner 2015).

After this short overview demonstrating that social-change related demands require engagement to avoid negative effects on well-being, in the following, a quintessential feature of our approach will be addressed, i.e., the role of ecological contexts in dealing with demands. For that purpose, we compared Germany and Poland, and also political-administrative regions within these countries. The comparison across countries revealed that appraisals of the demands as challenge versus threat and gain versus loss were relevant in Germany, but not in Poland (Lechner, Tomasik and Silbereisen 2014). We interpreted this as a

consequence of the less generous welfare regime in Poland that does not allow “thinking twice” before dealing with the demands. In 2007, Germany spent about 27% of GDP, whereas Poland spent about 18%, for public health, pensions, and other forms of welfare (OECD 2014).

We also examined exploration, a personal disposition to scrutinize contexts and embrace novelty. The idea here was that only higher exploration would help people to actualize the potential in the environment in coping with manifestations of social change. This “reaping” was demonstrated by showing that those higher in exploration reported experiencing more benefits of social change. This was especially so if they lived in regions that offered opportunities – in this case indexed by a higher divorce rate, conveying more liberal attitudes and higher Internet domain registration rates, signaling access to modern technologies. Obviously, personality constitutes an important resource in dealing with social change, but particularly so if there are relevant instigations available in the ecology. This moderation is certainly relevant for Korea because it demonstrates that trusting in personal strength is not enough. Specifically, it also requires adequate environments, which need to be developed and supported by policy intervention (Lechner, Obschonka and Silbereisen, forthcoming).

A final part of this work brings together all of the conditions identified in the Jena Model. We showed that work demands were negatively associated with well-being, and that engagement had positive effects. This applies overall, but when examined more closely, it is found that the association was less (!) negative if people lived in regions with a high unemployment rate. At first glance, this “social norm” or “downward comparison” effect is good news, because it shields people from the possibly negative effects of the ecology. Upon closer inspection, however, it may have a negative effect in the longer term, i.e., those affected by demands may avoid overcoming the obstacles because the comparison with others makes them feel inadequately comfortable (Pinquart, Silbereisen and Koerner 2009, 2010). In addition, we showed that, when living in very poor environments, disengagement, rather than engagement, may have a positive effect on well-being, demonstrating that successfully dealing with social change necessitates flexibility (Tomasik and Silbereisen 2012).

4. Conclusion

The imminent failure of a political system, indicated by a rapid decline in the provision for satisfying personal strivings and empowering collective life, often exhibits early warnings, such as hesitant attempts at economic liberalization combined with actions taken to maintain power through threats. If perceived as evidence of diminishing control, people will experience a mixture of new hopes and old concerns, but also feel a growing agency to challenge the system. The first almost indiscernible decline in loyalty may constitute the beginning of a

cascade of effects that, in the end, can overwhelm the old powers. Although accurately predicting the “tipping point” is difficult, opportunities for exchange between peoples and ideas from other countries are crucial. In this regard, the political system of North Korea may be protected in its existence for quite some time, in spite of its obvious deficiencies in supplying even the most basic needs of its population.

In this report, first, I addressed insights concerning the time soon after and a few years into German unification (1990s). They mainly referred to changes in the timing of important biographical transitions and relevant resources when confronting the societal changes. Second, I reported on how people dealt with the many new demands resulting from ongoing social change a decade and more after unification, in the 2000s, due to the effects of globalization and economic shocks.

As our research demonstrated, the main driver of rapid change in dissolution of a system is the alteration or replacement of social institutions that function as “pacemakers” in resolving developmental tasks, such as preparing for an occupation. This drives even adjacent cohorts apart, depending on their biographical status when the social change occurred. Those who finished their education just prior to unification may have trained for now obsolete professions, whereas those who finished later had time to adapt. Moreover, not everybody is affected to the same degree, i.e., it depends on social capital resources (that often become diminished through the transition and transformation), and on personal attributes gained already in the past, such as self-efficacy and other personality attributes. The factors that connect change on the aggregate level with individual adaptation are the intermediate contexts and related experiences, and this also explains why social change often needs time to actually affect people and change their behavior.

According to our results on the lives of people in the 2000s, uncertainties about the chance to resolve major developmental tasks in an era of globalization are the most dominant psychological features, with major consequences for well-being. Particularly, if accumulated, uncertainties convey the devaluation of past achievements and resources, and affect personal pride. Taken together, they constitute a major source of stress. Nevertheless, even under such conditions, people tend to engage actively in resolving the uncertainties. Moreover, if they are able to bring a positive sense of control in congruence with the engagement, the otherwise negative effects on well-being are minimized. Although in general not adequate, disengagement from the uncertainties, if used in circumstances of radically diminished resources, can be positive.

For the Korean Peninsula, two main insights of our research are probably relevant. First, the complex interplay of uncertainties, coping, sense of control and other personal endowments, and contextual opportunities for economic, social and cultural strivings in the regional context, provide multiple entry points for scaffolding policy interventions. Fostering “agency” (engagement,

initiative, self-efficacy, etc.) is a means to strengthen resilience and productivity under conditions of radical social change. Depending on the age of the people affected, this means educational interventions or change of work conditions and qualifications. The new social institutions in the North after a political change should provide scripts for adequate individual and collective behaviours to secure one's future in a democratic society. Our psychological research demonstrated institutions' power in influencing behavior, which constitutes a potent resource that should be fully utilized. Instead of blaming individuals for their possible ineffectiveness in adapting to the changed circumstances, institutional reforms should be seen as a responsibility of all levels of government. In the German situation, positive experiences were achieved through establishing a model of institutionalized self-government in the former East, providing room for local and regional autonomy (Holtmann and Rademacher 2016, in this HSR Forum). From a psychological perspective, this is likely to be especially critical for the development of individual and collective self-efficacy.

Second, it is important to note that unification has much in common with migration, although it is institutions, and not people, that move. In such situations, people experience a conflict between their wish to retain what they were used to and may have appreciated, and their desire to adapt to new expectations and promises for a good life in the future. Regarding results of research on acculturation, the style of encounters called "integration" is often viewed as prerequisite for future life success, meaning a simultaneous retaining of former traditions and successful adjustment to the new circumstance. In reality, however, especially soon after the dissolution of the system, both new citizens from the North and the receiving society from the South will likely expect assimilation, i.e., low retaining and high adjustment. As in the case of Germany, segregation (high retaining, low adjustment) or marginalization (low retaining, low adjustment) may also exist to a substantial extent (Berry 2005). Wisdom is required from the political elite in the South to recognize that, in order to achieve a unified Korea, both former countries would actually need to change. For this reason, assimilation should not be the preferred mode. In Germany, it also took a long period of time before this simple truth was widely accepted. Moreover, as the resemblance to migration indicates, one needs patience for a process that will ultimately take a generation or more to complete.

A final comment on the particular situation in North Korea – all of the agency factors deemed relevant regarding our research on the German unification situation may be limited among larger segments of the population, due to severe childhood adversities based on malnutrition. These are known to greatly diminish certain important capabilities, such as sense of control. Such experiences may not be overly relevant under sufficient conditions for human development, but may be crucial when confronted in the emerging new Korea, with severe uncertainties in adolescence and adulthood, especially in the North.

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