

Commentary

Human Development 2001;44:284-287

**Human
Development**

**Maybe Fewer than Three Cheers for
Self-Regulation**

John Modell

Brown University, Providence, R.I., USA

Key Words

Institutions · Life course · Self-regulation · Social history

As a social-historian-turned-developmental, I've learned a great deal from the fine essay of Carsten Wrosch and Alexandra M. Freund. The term 'self-regulation' already had a pleasing ring for me, somehow, and now I know what it means. More than that, I have some superb clues about how the psychological mechanisms that the concept evokes deal with life's challenges, and I have a few clues, too, about how self-regulation may be a component of individual development. In view of my aim of seeing human development as occurring embedded within history, I am especially gratified that the authors have sought to think about self-regulation as affected by social change and historical trends. But I am less unequivocally satisfied with their elaboration of this important point, and I think that at times they seem more cheerleaders for self-regulation than its historians. My goal in this note is to raise a few points of respectful contention with Wrosch and Freund, in hope that in the end these points will cohere, pointing toward further specification and expansion of their ideas.

Over the last two decades, the sociologist John Meyer and several collaborators have brought together a body of theory and empirical evidence asserting a historical trend toward the institutionalization of selfhood itself – 'the evolving modern self, a focus of legitimate and sometimes compulsory subjectivity' [Meyer, 1986: 200]. This argument, highly relevant to the Wrosch and Freund essay, can be briefly put in terms of the expansion in the Euro-American world and, arguably, worldwide, of institutionalized presumptions about persons according to which each individual may best be understood as free-standing and self-determining; increasingly unhedged about by allegiances to family, religion, group, locality. In this schema, the state has been a very

KARGER

Fax +41 61 306 12 34
E-Mail karger@karger.ch
www.karger.com

© 2001 S. Karger AG, Basel
0018-716X/01/0445-0284\$17.50/0

Accessible online at:
www.karger.com/journals/hde

Dr. John Modell
125 Morris Avenue
Providence, RI 02906 (USA)
Tel. +1 401 863 2176, Fax +1 401 863 3123
E-Mail John_Modell@brown.edu

active and intentional participant, because of an ineluctable complementarity between the modern institutional state and direct, unmediated access of these states to persons conceived as free-standing individuals – ‘citizens’.

There is a citation to the Meyer group’s work in Wrosch and Freund, to a 1988 essay about ‘The Life Course as a Cultural Construction’. The citation is offered as warrant for asserting a role of social institutions in development in that they ‘canalize and shape people’s life courses,’ but in their next sentence, Wrosch and Freund assure us that the role of institutions can be counted on to be pliable to ‘historical change’. The authors offer several examples of historical change under the general heading of ‘deregulation of the life course’: increase in separation and divorce, postponed marriage, lessened fertility, and extended retirement. Moreover, these ‘deregulations’ have been somewhat balanced off by a reduction of non-normative events like disease, early death, and bad harvests. The line of argument presuming that ‘historical change’ causes institutional change, however, runs quite contrary to the thrust of the Meyer group’s work. The latter, an example of what among sociologists is called ‘the new institutionalist’ school of thought [Powell and DiMaggio, 1991], sees institutions as causal, not caused, through paths that involve, among other things, a great deal of emulation by organizational actors, including the social and behavioral science disciplines. My point here is not to make a full exposition of this theory, but to suggest that readers of *Human Development* might acquaint themselves with it, for it suggests a quite different way of making sense of self-regulation than that put forth by Wrosch and Freund.

Wrosch and Freund, with appropriate caution, make no claim to be historical scholars, resting their argument for a lessening over the last generation or more of truly insistent normative life-course scheduling on the scholarship of Karl Ulrich Meyer and a few others, and passing inconclusively over the issue of a possible trend in non-normative life events. ‘Non-normative life events have occurred across all phases of history, due to historical events ... and social-structural conditions of each historical period ... Some time periods, such as the pre-industrial period, were characterized by less predictable life events, such as disease, early death, and bad harvest.’

Non-normative life events ‘demand self-regulatory skills’ to keep individuals on course, just as the relaxation of the normative scheduling of the life course invites such skills to play a larger part in the volitional organization of individuals’ lives. Relative to individuals lacking such self-regulatory skills, those possessing self-regulatory skills will also better weather life’s non-normative storms. And self-regulators, managing better the relaxed normative scheduling of the new life course, will make good lives, as, on account of the same historical trends those resigned or compliant persons who once would have succeeded well on account of their capacity for comfortably accepting external regulation will no longer readily thrive. The modern self adapts to both disorienting change and nasty surprise, regulates itself, makes its own choices. Some make wrong choices, of course, but, overall, as Wrosch and Freund state, ‘across a wide range of phenomena ... individuals tend to select those self-regulatory processes that are tailored to their opportunity structures for goal attainment, ... [and] show clear patterns of positive relations to indicators of successful development.’

Self-regulation, then, seems especially well adapted to contemporary conditions: this modernism is a central element in the argument of Wrosch and Freund. But what if the historical trend in non-normative life events was so decidedly downward that, on balance, one might say that structuring one’s own life course does *not* today demand more self-regulation than it did (say) a century ago, as industrialization flowered – if the

decline in the insistence of the normative life course has been no more dramatic than the decline in the likelihood that one would confront unanticipated crisis?

From my comfortable perch, life in industrial society a century ago seems, simply, filled with calamity. In an old essay [Modell, 1979], I made some effort to speculate about how families functioned in this era, and was powerfully struck by the prevalence of morbidity, both acute and chronic, and the remarkable frequency with which workers lost income for this reason, without much institutional infrastructure (outside of the family itself) to compensate. A national survey of industrial workers in 1901, for instance, found that over the course of the year, 15.4% of male family heads lost an average of 8.8 weeks of work during the year on account of sickness. This was in addition to 26.4% who lost an average of over 10 weeks of pay during the year because they had been laid off and couldn't find other work. 1901 was not a year of profound depression, either.

Mortality data make a like point. In New York City in 1901, to take a period after which improvements in water supply had considerably reduced death rates, a woman marrying a 25-year-old husband experienced a 1-in-10 chance of being widowed within a decade, a 2-in-10 chance of being widowed within two decades. Her husband faced almost as steep a likelihood of finding himself a widower. If a couple had three children surviving their first years, they had a 1-in-5 chance of losing one child to death before he or she achieved mid-adolescence. By the same token, a surviving child born to that couple had a 1-in-4 chance of losing a parent by the time he was 15, and 1.6% chance of being left a full orphan. These rates exceed those of most third-world countries today, but I write within a month of disastrous earthquakes in India and El Salvador, and I will not easily be persuaded that life in those corners of the world today are not filled with overwhelmingly more non-normative shocks than in my tidy life-space.

Surely, then, the argument is not that people even in the relatively recent past lacked adequate occasion to display self-regulation. Do we, though, presume that when challenged by non-normative life crises, our predecessors turned not to self-regulation but instead (why?) to some form of communal regulation, or to God, or to fatalism? If so, are not similar devices available currently? Wrosch and Freund indicate that 'it seems likely' that such devices are less available today than at an earlier date, but I wonder if this is really the issue. I suspect that Wrosch and Freund, and many of us along with them, simply do not highly value these devices, or perhaps the long-term personal and social outcomes associated with them, as we do self-regulation and its sequelae, for instance the 'subjective well-being' experienced by young adults when they apply self-regulatory processes to deal with instances of surprising ill-health. Inherently, subjective well-being is surely a good thing, but wouldn't also be the kind of enhanced social solidarity that often emerges from mutual assistance? Perhaps it is premature to conclude that we adjudge self-regulation superior not so much because of the fit that Wrosch and Freund aver between self-regulation and the contemporary lifecourse (for they haven't really established the historical trends that might justify the distinctiveness of that fit). Perhaps it is rather the fact that many of us already share these preferences with Wrosch and Freund explains some of the intuitive appeal of their argument to us.

I suggest that if a closer historical investigation of trends in both normative and non-normative aspects of the life course (together with some kind of an adjudication of the relative importance of self-regulation for normative and non-normative life events) led to a conclusion that self-regulation was actually no more necessary now than before, *it just wouldn't seem right* to us. Meyer suggests why in a relatively speculative essay on

'The Social Construction of the Psychology of Childhood' [1988]. Here, the enterprise in which all *Human Development* authors participate is itself understood as a (thriving) aspect of that same institutionalization of the self which I mentioned above. 'The Western economic, cultural and political systems are all built up around – and are justified or legitimated by – expanded and expanding notions of individual personhood ... [Contemporary] cultural systems depend on ideologies of the morally endowed and responsible individual.' [Meyer, 1988: 49]. These ideologies, Meyer argues, do not merely proclaim the capable, autonomous, plan-making and -adjusting, self-regarding individual, but celebrate a way of life. In this way of life, 'there is a dialectic side ... The standardization of the subjective in objective forms [like articles in *Human Development*] institutionalizes it in a new control system,' socially overseen [Meyer 1988: 62]. We sense, perhaps, that the early industrial 'control system' does not fit with self-regulating people as does the contemporary 'control system'. But, perhaps, neither does Wrosch's and Freund's account of life today quite capture this component of how lives are managed.

The consequences of this kind of historicized understanding of Wrosch's and Freund's self-regulated modern person would, I suppose, push them and those who (like me) respect their insights in the direction of seeking a more fully contextualized psychology. One approach might be to seek a model for the kind of society that will develop as the proportion of self-regulators in the population increases. The market provides one ready-to-hand model, for the market surely deals elegantly well with the coordination of individually held tastes, or 'goals' as Wrosch and Freund put it. If this seems wrong-headed, one might move in the opposite direction, and seek a better model of how self-regulating individuals thereby regulate one another by incorporating (following Meyer) institutionally inspired themes within the ostensibly freely choosing individual. No doubt, more nuanced, more developmentally aware models can be sought that recall that even today the family in practice commonly stands between the individual and the state, and between the individual and the market.

Maybe fewer than three cheers for self-regulation, then, at least so far. But three cheers for the highly implicative Wrosch and Freund essay, which goes a long way toward raising this question.

References

- Meyer, J. (1986). The self and the life course: Institutionalization and its effects. In A. Sorensen, F. E. Weinert, and L. R. Sherrod (Eds.), *Human development and the life course: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 199–216). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Meyer, J.W. (1988). The social construction of the psychology of childhood: Some contemporary processes. In E.M. Hetherington, R. M. Lerner, and M. Perlmutter, (Eds.), *Child development in life-span perspective* (pp. 47–65). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Modell, J. (1979). Changing risks, changing adaptations: American families in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In A.J. Lichtman and J.R. Challinor (Eds.), *Kin and communities. Family in America* (pp. 119–144). Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Powell, W.W., and DiMaggio, P.J. (Eds.). (1991). *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.