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The Oxford Handbook of

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

and CULTURE

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY  
PERSPECTIVE



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# The Oxford Handbook of Human Development and Culture

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Lene Arnett Jensen

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## CHAPTER

# 33

## Social Mobility in the Transition to Adulthood: Educational Systems, Career Entry, and Individual Agency

Jutta Heckhausen and Jacob Shane

### Abstract

In this chapter, the authors merge lifespan motivational theory with empirical studies to illustrate how societal opportunities and constraints to social mobility influence individuals' striving to attain socioeconomic status. The authors begin by outlining key propositions of the *motivational theory of lifespan development*. They then discuss current and historical societal conditions and belief systems regarding social inequality and social mobility and how these belief systems impact individuals' active attempts to regulate their own development. Subsequently, the authors focus on the transition from adolescence to adulthood and consider in greater detail possible avenues to social mobility. In particular, they discuss how paths to social mobility are constituted by educational and vocational training systems and how these paths are shaped by societal conditions and belief systems.

**Key Words:** socioeconomic status, social mobility, adolescence, adulthood, motivation

We open this chapter by reporting on the experiences of Jacob Shane, the second author of this piece, as he transitioned back and forth between two countries during his formative years of late adolescence. This report sets the stage for our reflections about how society structures the boundary conditions of social mobility in the transition to adulthood. Here is Jacob's experience:

Looking back on my adolescence growing up in the United States and New Zealand, I experienced two different education systems that in turn directed me toward two very different paths toward future socioeconomic status. In the United States, my teachers would constantly reinforce the idea that I could achieve whatever I wanted in life, so long as I worked hard and developed the ability needed to succeed. This was the mentality of the American school system, seemingly aimed at fostering self-confidence and overly ambitious goal striving. Everyone was expected to finish high school, and

nearly everyone was expected to attend some form of postsecondary education.

When my family moved to New Zealand, the messages changed. I entered school during what would be 10th grade in the American school system, and although the teachers were just as encouraging as those I encountered in America, the expectation that all students would continue their education was noticeably absent. Indeed, this was the final year of required education in the New Zealand school system. The entire school year was devoted to preparing for the final exams, after which time students would choose to remain in school with the intention of gaining vocational training or attending university, or they would leave school altogether and enter the work force. To the chagrin of my parents, I chose the latter and began working at a gas station after passing my final exams. My family decided to move back to America shortly after, at which point I re-entered the American school system, progressed through high school, university, and postgraduate training.

Although the quality of education I received in New Zealand was similar to the education I received in the United States, the subtle differences between societal expectations for pursuing higher education between the two countries pushed me toward radically different paths for social mobility. Had my family stayed in New Zealand, I would have most likely remained working service jobs, perhaps with the hope of eventually owning my own business. Instead, my family decided to return to the United States, where the societal pressure to pursue higher education pushed me toward the roughly 12 additional years of schooling I received in an effort to become a professor. In both cases, the choice of how far I wanted to pursue education and what career I wanted to attain was ultimately mine to make, but the different expectations altered my educational and career goals, in turn impacting my social mobility as I transitioned into adulthood.

### Chapter Preview

Modern lifespan developmental psychology sees individuals as active agents in shaping their own development and life course (Heckhausen, 1999; Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981). This emphasis on individuals' role in shaping their own life converges with 20th- and 21st-century cultural belief systems widely shared in Western industrialized societies and particularly in the United States, the homeland of the "American Dream." However, this notion of individuals as active agents who directly contribute to their own development is not a given and is not common to all human societies. Instead, this belief system is conditioned by the society in which the individual lives. Societies, with their social structures, educational and employment institutions, and belief systems about what constitutes a successful life and how to attain success in life, set the limits but also serve as scaffolds of individuals' agency in shaping their life course. These societal influences shape individuals' action fields by providing specific opportunities and constraints at different times in life and for different social groups, such as for men and women; younger, middle-aged, and older adults; and people coming from low, middle-class, and high social status.

Considering social mobility, the focus of this chapter, societies vary greatly over time and across the globe in important parameters of their citizens' action fields. Important questions to consider when assessing the opportunities and constraints present

in the action fields provided by a given society include: How extensive are the differences in access to resources between people at the top and at the bottom of the social ladder? Is it feasible for an individual to climb the social ladder, and do some hold an advantage over others in this endeavor? When is the best time in life to attempt such a climb? And if one has missed the best time for social climbing, can one catch up later in adulthood? Which factors determine whether one is successful or not in climbing the ladder or avoiding a fall down the ladder? Is moving up in society mostly due to an individual's capacities and strivings, or mostly due to having the right kind of social support, or is it a matter of luck?

Different societies answer these questions differently, and it stands to reason that individuals in these societies are influenced accordingly in their objective opportunities, as well as in their belief systems about inequality, what constitutes success in life, and how to actively strive for a successful life. Although this is a new area of inquiry, we already have some initial empirical evidence from life course sociology and lifespan developmental psychology to begin to answer some of these questions.

In this chapter, we first briefly present our motivational theory of lifespan development with its specific propositions about individual goal engagement and disengagement with developmental goals. We then discuss the general societal conditions and belief systems regarding social inequality and social mobility. Subsequently, we zero in on the transition from adolescence to adulthood and consider in greater detail possible avenues to social mobility, including the educational and vocational training system. Throughout the chapter, we use the examples of Germany and the United States to illustrate universalities and differences in the action fields that societies provide for development-related goal striving. At first glance, these two countries may not seem so very different in their social structure and belief systems. However, there are some critical differences between the United States and Germany in the scope of social inequality; their educational institutions, vocational training, and the canalization of careers; and in common belief systems about social inequality and social mobility. Collectively, these differences render these two countries interesting counterparts for comparison; however, they by no means completely capture the diverse strategies individuals adopt across all societies.

## Motivation and Individual Agency in Lifespan Development

According to our theoretical approach, individual agency can be described in terms of two basic characteristics: (1) the striving for control of the environment (i.e., primary control) and of oneself (i.e., secondary control) and (2) the organization of behavior into goal engagement and goal disengagement cycles (Heckhausen, 2011; Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2010; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010).<sup>1</sup> This coordinated motivational system allows individuals to actively influence their own development across the lifespan. The *motivational theory of lifespan development* conceptualizes this process and has generated a substantial amount of empirical evidence in support of a number of the theory's central propositions (for review, see Heckhausen et al., 2010). Here is a succinct summary of the four major theoretical propositions, followed by a more detailed discussion of relevant aspects.

First, the theory proposes that striving to control one's environment is fundamental for adaptive functioning in general and development across the lifespan in particular. This striving for primary control encompasses striving to control one's own developmental future (e.g., educational degree, career).

The second major proposition reflects three lifespan trajectories: (1) the capacity for primary control follows an inverted U-shape (rapid increase in early life, peak in midlife, decrease in old age), (2) primary control striving is stable and highly desirable across the lifespan, and (3) secondary control striving (i.e., directed at self, see more details in the section "Lifespan Trajectories and Congruence Between Control Striving and Control Opportunities") increases with socioemotional and cognitive maturation and the increasing need to compensate for failure and control for loss in advanced age.

The third proposition is that individuals' attempts to regulate their development are most effective when their control strivings are congruent with opportunities for goal attainment at the given time in the lifespan. This includes specific institutional and structural characteristics of a given society. Thus, to be successful, individuals have to carefully optimize their selection of goals to reflect the best fit with age-graded opportunities in society.

Finally, the fourth major proposition of the motivational theory of lifespan development

addresses the way in which control striving is sequentially organized into action phases of goal engagement and disengagement. After selecting a particular goal (e.g., to try to obtain admission in a 4-year college), the individual should mobilize all behavioral and motivational resources to pursue the goal (phase of goal engagement). Then, when opportunities are declining below a critical point or costs for further goal pursuit become prohibitive, the individual should disengage from the goal and, as needed, use compensatory secondary control strategies of self-protection. Disengagement will set free resources for engagement with new or adjusted goals that are attainable.

## Primacy of Primary Control Striving

Building on earlier theory (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982), the motivational theory of lifespan development distinguishes between control strivings directed toward the external environment (primary control strivings, "change the world") and motivational strategies directed toward the self, its goals, cognitions, and emotions (secondary control strivings, "change the self"; see Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Heckhausen et al., 2010). These motivational strategies are mutually reinforcing, allowing individuals to sustain commitment to or discretely disengage from an ongoing goal pursuit. For instance, while actively pursuing a goal, individuals can strengthen their volitional commitment by enhancing the perceived opportunity for and their personal control over attaining the pursued goal (Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, & Stellar, 1990; Gollwitzer & Kinney, 1989; Heckhausen, 1999; Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987; Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2010). These selective secondary control strategies (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995) facilitate the individual's goal-directed investment of thought and effort (selective primary control strivings), particularly during times of change or uncertainty (Hall, Perry, Ruthig, Hladkyj, & Chipperfield, 2006; Poulin & Heckhausen, 2007). To help illustrate this, consider Mary, a hypothetical American who recently graduated from a university with a degree in biology and a career goal of becoming a physician. After selecting this career goal, Mary may selectively engage with attaining her career goal by taking the medical school entrance exams (MCAT) and applying to medical schools (selective primary control strategies), telling herself that she has the skills needed to become a physician (selective secondary control strategies). These selective engagement strategies increase the



chances that Mary will successfully attain her career goal of becoming a physician. . .

### ***Lifespan Trajectories and Congruence Between Control Striving and Control Opportunities***

Of course, not all goals are attainable. Indeed, motivational theory contends that the most adaptive developmental goal pursuits are those that have an intermediate level of success/failure (McClelland, 1961). Thus, individuals must develop strategies to compensate for inevitable failures experienced in goal pursuits. Examples of compensation strategies include seeking help or alternative means to attain the goal (compensatory primary control) or downwardly adjusting the pursued goal to something more attainable, disengaging altogether from the goal, discounting the value of the previously pursued goal, or using downward social comparisons (compensatory secondary control strategies; see Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). Returning to our hypothetical American example, if Mary experiences setbacks or failures in her pursuit of becoming a physician, she will need to compensate in order to maintain her motivational resources that can then be directed toward future goal pursuits. For instance, after being rejected by all the medical schools she applied to, Mary may seek help from others and enroll in an entrance-exam preparation course (compensatory primary control strategies) or downplay the importance of becoming a physician and adjust her career goal to something more attainable, such as a physician's assistant (compensatory secondary control strategies). The capacity to disengage from goal pursuits allows individuals

to maintain their motivational resources and then direct these motivational resources toward future goal pursuits. Indeed, goal disengagement is a powerful component of individuals' long-term capacity to influence their own development (Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003).

Primary control striving remains a stable source of motivation throughout the life course (see stable line for primary control striving in Figure 33.1), whereas the *goals* that individuals pursue with their primary control striving are generally adjusted to an individual's available primary control capacity at a given point in the life course. When considering the transition to adulthood, individuals are experiencing a rapidly increasing capacity to control the attainment of their pursued goals (see curvilinear increasing curve for primary control capacity in Figure 33.1). In addition, individuals are also learning secondary control strategies that will allow them greater control over the regulation of their motivational commitment or disengagement from goal pursuits (see linearly increasing curve for secondary control strategies in Figure 33.1). Despite this general increase in individuals' capacity to regulate their development as they transition into adulthood, specific goal pursuits (e.g., finishing education, having a child, entering a career) need to be adjusted to both the individual's age- and social-graded control potential (Heckhausen, 1999). The opportunities to obtain most important life goals follow a general pattern of increasing, peaking, and then decreasing opportunity. Thus, individuals must respond to the constraints to and opportunities of goal pursuit enacted through biological maturation (e.g.,

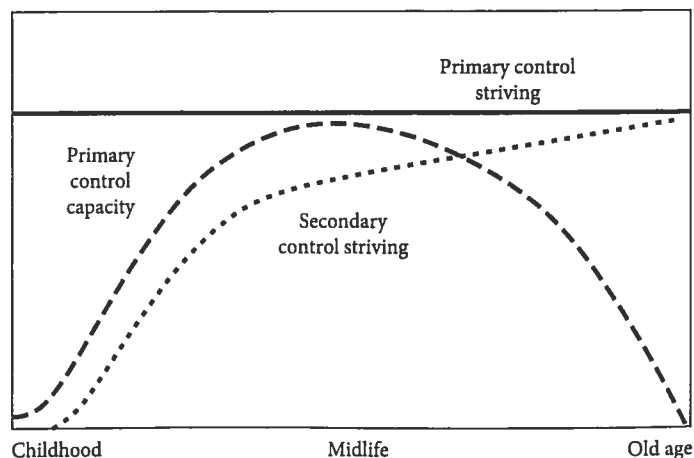


Fig. 33.1 Hypothetical lifespan trajectories for primary control capacity and primary and secondary control striving (adapted from Heckhausen, 1999).

the "biological clock" and childbearing) and societal institutions (e.g., the age-graded structure of the education system).

#### HOW CONGRUENCE PLAYS OUT FOR DEVELOPMENTAL REGULATION

Social, cultural, and economic constraints direct individuals toward particular developmental goal pursuits and are tightly tied to an individual's age, both in terms of biological and maturation processes and in terms of expected behavior patterns for different age groups (Baltes, 1987; Heckhausen, 1999). In effect, individuals internalize societal norms regarding what goal pursuits are appropriate for different ages in the lifespan, in turn directing their personal goal engagement toward these age-appropriate goal pursuits (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965). The age-graded goals that societal norms and constraints direct individuals toward are referred to as developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1948) or developmental goals (Heckhausen, 1999), and these parallel individuals' lifespan trajectories of primary control capacity (Figure 33.1). These maturation and aging processes are reflected in the expectations society has for appropriate goal pursuits at particular points in the lifespan. In turn, societal norms and institutions direct goal choice by providing age-graded opportunities to pursue developmental "on-time" goals and age-graded constraints to hinder the pursuit of "off-time" goals. For example, while pursuing a higher education degree after one has transitioned into adulthood can produce positive results, it will require additional effort and increasingly conflict with other important developmental goal pursuits (e.g., family building).

The societal facilitation of developmental goal pursuits allows individuals to pursue age-appropriate (on-time) goals with less effort and less constraints than age-inappropriate (off-time) goal pursuits. Thus, individuals' engagement toward on-time goal pursuits is congruent with societal opportunities, making goal engagement strategies generally adaptive.

#### Action Phases of Engagement and Disengagement with Developmental Goals

The *action-phase model of developmental regulation* has been developed in the context of the motivational theory of lifespan development to generate specific predictions about the control strategies used to pursue or deactivate goals at different phases in the lifespan (Heckhausen, 1999; Heckhausen et al., 2010). People try to influence their own development by selecting important developmental goals to pursue, actively engaging their behavioral and motivational resources with these goals, and then, when opportunities dwindle or costs become formidable, disengaging and adjusting or reselecting new goals to engage with. This sequence comprises what we call the cycle of action phases in developmental regulation (Figure 33.2).

In the first phase of the action phase cycle, individuals need to select an appropriate goal to pursue. *Optimized goal selection* can be attained by using certain heuristics for goal choice (Heckhausen et al., 2010). We have already discussed the first optimization heuristic (goal–opportunity congruence), that motivational strategies are not adaptive in and of themselves; instead, motivational strategies become adaptive when they are congruent with

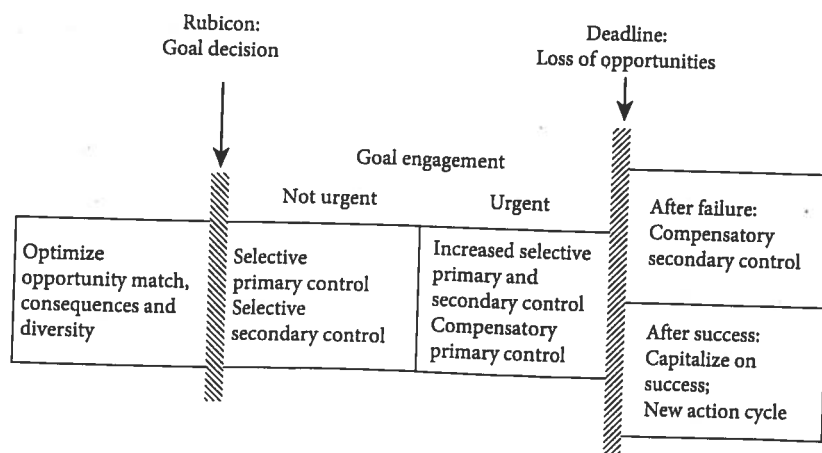


Fig. 33.2 Action phase model of developmental regulation (adapted from Heckhausen, 1999).

an individual's capacity to control the attainment of a given goal. The second optimization heuristic (consider interdomain and long-term consequences) is that goal pursuits should have positive (or at least nondetrimental) effects on individuals' capacity to pursue important developmental goals in other domains of their lives or in the longer term future. In this way, individuals should maintain synergy between goal pursuits in order to maximize the effectiveness of their limited motivational resources. For example, consider a middle-class American married man with children and his investment of motivational resources into his career development. This man's investment of motivational resources toward career goals would be considered adaptive to the extent that it has a long-term positive (or at least nondetrimental) impact on his relationships with his wife and children. The third optimization heuristic (diversity of goals) is that individuals should not become too specialized or narrow in their goal pursuits. Instead, individuals should maintain a range of goal pursuits across important life domains (goal diversity). This heuristic prevents individuals from becoming overly dependent on attainment of a given goal and provides greater long-term developmental potential by allowing individuals to simultaneously develop across multiple life domains. In the words of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1605/1615), "It is the part of a wise man to keep himself today for tomorrow, and not venture all his eggs in one basket."

### ***Implications for Individual Agency in Social Mobility***

When applying the motivational theory of lifespan development to social mobility, it is clear that a society where there is both some (albeit not too extreme) social inequality and some social mobility provides good opportunities for individuals to actively influence their own development across the life course. Moreover, in order to make use of the potential for social mobility present in a given society, an individual needs to perceive this potential for social mobility and expect personal access to the relevant resources, abilities, and motivational investment necessary to strive for upward mobility. Such beliefs about the degree of social mobility in a given society and the means by which upward mobility is achieved are likely a product of at least two sources, the "dominant ideology" (Huber & Form, 1973) and individuals' autobiographical and vicarious (from family and peers) experiences regarding social mobility (see, e.g., Kluegel

& Smith, 1986; and, more generally, Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Dominant societal ideologies about social inequality and mobility vary diachronically across human history and synchronically across different societies at the same historical time. The following sections of this chapter discuss historical emergence and cross-national variation of social inequality and its reflection in commonly held beliefs about both the sources of inequality and the potential and means of social mobility.

### **Social Inequality, Social Mobility, and Societal Belief Systems Through Human History**

In this section, we pull together work from different disciplines in the social and behavioral sciences, such as evolutionary psychology, anthropology, sociology, and archeology, to outline the past and present of social inequality. In this discussion, we juxtapose "objective" social inequality and social constructions of social inequality as they pertain to different societies at different points in human history.

#### ***A Brief History of Social Inequality***

Social inequality and social mobility are not a given in human communities. Many ancestral and existing (e.g., the !Kung in the Kalahari, the Inuit in the Arctic, Indigenous Australians) hunter-gatherer societies are egalitarian, sharing and communally using all important resources, providing generally equal status yet differentiated labor roles for men and women, and having no individual ownership of resources (Hayden, 2007). There is controversy about the earliest emergence of social inequality and whether it preceded or followed the widespread establishment of farming and the domestication of animals (Hayden, 2007). It seems uncontested, though, that among humans it was the production of surplus food that ultimately gave rise to private ownership. Archeological finds of burials with elaborate grave goods that require hundreds of work hours (White, 1993) provide the first solid evidence for social inequality during the Upper Paleolithic period (50,000–10,000 years ago). Such extravagant burials could only have been provided for a privileged subgroup, with the majority of group members having to provide their labor (Hayden, 2007).

Inequality between peasants on the low end and nobility at the high end was similar across fertile and populous areas around the globe until about 1800, when a substantial divergence took place (Pinto,



2013). Around that time, Australia, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand became substantially wealthier, followed by Japan and Europe in the early 1900s. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the average standard of living is no longer primarily predicted by one's position in society but instead by one's geographical location. This great international divergence between the Western and industrialized societies and the rest of the globe has stretched social inequality to nearly twice what it was in the early 1800s (Milanovic, 2009).

### Social Inequality Today

Social inequality varies greatly across the globe. Figure 33.3 shows Gini coefficients<sup>2</sup> for each country. Between countries, the Gini coefficient ranges between 23 for Sweden and 63 for South Africa, with Germany at 27 and the United States at 45 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013). The darker shades in Figure 33.3 indicate greater social inequality and are more common among developing countries in South America and Africa, but also hold for China and the United States. People living in more unequal nations are less healthy, have shorter life expectancies, and experience higher crime rates and other negative social outcomes (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). The lightest shades in Figure 33.3 indicate lower Gini coefficients, and thus the least social inequality is shown for most of Central Europe and particularly for the Scandinavian countries. However, even within these European countries that have relatively more equality, the consequences of social inequality can be severe and are even observable when looking within a city. For example, in Glasgow (Scotland), a man living in Carlton, the poorest neighborhood, has a 28-year shorter lifespan than a man living in Milngavie, the most affluent neighborhood (CSDH,

2008). In addition, the effects of social inequality on morbidity and mortality exist in a graded fashion, with differences observable between each rung of the social ladder.

Although inequality has been rising in Westernized countries since the Industrial Revolution, recent decades have produced a rapidly increasing spike of inequality in Western European countries and particularly in North America (OECD, 2011). In Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the top 10% of earners receive nine times more income than the poorest 10%. Figure 33.4 shows changes in inequality assessed by Gini coefficients for major OECD economies since 1985 (OECD, 2011). The globalization of markets has increased the competition between companies and between individuals (e.g., skilled versus nonskilled workers), particularly in countries where social inequality is based mainly on individual resources (e.g., the United States, the United Kingdom) and not buffered by state-regulated welfare systems (as in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands; Blossfeld et al., 2007). This interaction between globalized market forces and the economic and welfare systems present in a given country produces substantial variability of social inequality across countries and can be as high as 14 to 1 (richest to poorest 10%) for countries such as the United States, Israel, and Turkey, or even 27 to 1 for Mexico and Chile (OECD, 2011).

What are the implications for social mobility given this present state of inequality? For one, as shown in Figure 33.5, the recent and substantial increase in social inequality in most Western industrialized societies has rendered it harder for individuals from the poorest part of the population to



Fig. 33.3 Social inequality around the globe as reflected in Gini coefficients by country.

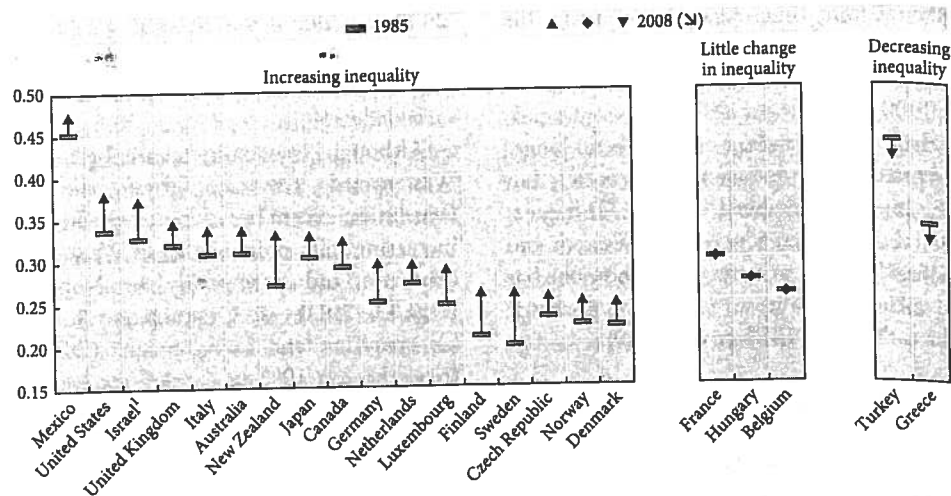


Fig. 33.4 Changes in income inequality. Source: OECD Database on Household Income Distribution and Poverty.

attain upward social mobility. Similarly, the most affluent are unlikely to fall on the social ladder, a phenomenon referred to as “stickiness at the ends.” This negative correlation between social inequality and mobility has been referred to as the “Great Gatsby Curve” (see Figure 33.5, from Corak, 2013, Figure 33.1). Even in a society like the United States, where Americans might subscribe to an ideology of upward mobility for everyone, increasing social inequality is associated with increasingly greater restrictions to social mobility. This is so because the

relative deprivation of material resources in the lowest quintiles of society is so dire and disproportionate that it produces distinct disadvantages for these individuals’ opportunities to attain upward social mobility. For instance, the quality of the neighborhood a child grows up in (including crime rate, quality of schools) dramatically alters the steps and second chances given to individuals, making the prospects of successfully progressing through the educational system and attaining a promising career prohibitively difficult for those born and raised in

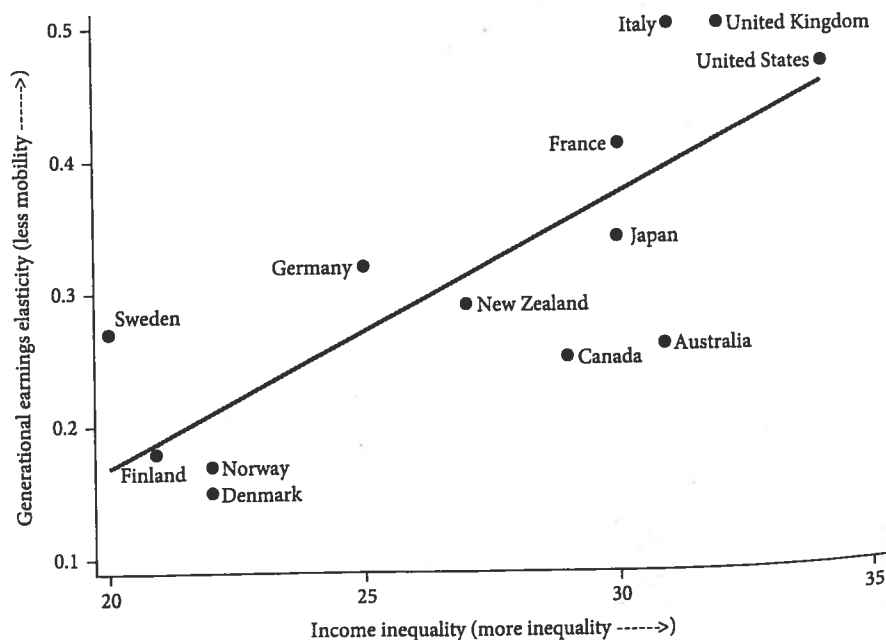


Fig. 33.5 The Great Gatsby curve: More inequality is associated with less mobility across the generations (adopted from Corak, 2013, Figure 1).

impoverished neighborhoods. In other words, it is harder to climb a ladder when the rungs are further apart (Noah, 2012).

### ***Attitudes Toward Social Inequality in the Past***

In ancient and feudal societies, inequality was viewed as a natural state of affairs that was inescapable and unquestioned (Elias, 1969). Most ancient and feudal agrarian societies had a rigid social structure that did not allow for mobility between the social classes, with the possible exception of the clergy or military. In such societies, the idea of qualitatively changing one's social status in the community from what one's parents were to a new status within one's lifetime was unthinkable. Inequality in these feudal societies was largely manifested and maintained by a social structure wherein peasants toiled the fields in the countryside to produce the surplus that the nobility and their entourage (craftsmen, clergy, artists) lived on. The dominant belief was one of limited resources and productive potential, a zero sum game in which anyone's gain will be his neighbor's loss. The pronounced social inequality of these societies is maintained not only by social sanctions and power of the nobility, but also by the nature of the morality of peasantry based on social and religious constraints that conceived of the social class system as God-given, inevitable, and the natural state of affairs (Elias, 1969). Economic behavior of the individual aimed at profiting individually from the need state of another individual would have appeared as unnatural during this era (Thompson, 1971).

With the rise of capitalism, individuals lost their attachment to the land, moved about geographically, and became less bound by the social structure and morality code of their community of origin. Moreover, production forces expanded rapidly and conveyed the perceived freedom of unlimited economic growth. Individuals in emerging capitalist societies could rise without condemning their neighbor to fall (Macfarlane, 1991). Thus, gradually, the communal morality of the zero sum game was transformed into one in which individuals (not families or communities) improve their lot with or without negative consequences for their neighbors, and, eventually, the need state of the other becomes the valued profit opportunity of the self. This allowed for individual economic goals to achieve material advantages and to become unrestrained by communal, family, and religious values and practices.

### ***Belief Systems About Social Inequality and Mobility***

With the rise of capitalism, individualistic and meritocratic belief systems developed in Europe and North America. Economic and religious origins are common across the continents, but additional factors related to political and other cultural specifics of American history led to the development of a specific and particularly pronounced version of individualistic beliefs in America that came to be known as the "American Dream" (McNamee & Miller, 2009).

The unbridled individualism exalted by the American Dream is partly due to Adam Smith's principles of a free market economy, including the notions of private ownership, competition between individuals, rational self-interest, and a laissez-faire approach of the government (Smith, 1776/1976). These principles were widely accepted in the capitalist world, albeit in Europe the role of the government is viewed differently (see the section "Transition to Adulthood: Opportunities and Constraints in Different Societies"). Converging with these economic principles, the Protestant belief system and morality code further idealized the prevailing belief that individual striving for worldly distinctions is necessary to live a successful life and, especially in its Calvinist form, is linked to the notion of being predestined for salvation (Weber, 1905/1958). In short, individuals would work hard to be successful—that is, upwardly mobile in society—in order to prove to themselves and others that they were predestined for eternal salvation. "Industry, frugality, and prudence" became the prime virtues of early capitalism (Wiess, 1969) and inspired early American moralistic novels such as the *rags-to-riches* stories of Horatio Alger (1832–1899).

In addition to these economic and religious origins, American individualism was strongly promoted by the country's historical roots as a nation of immigrants, explorers, and pioneers. Individual freedom and chances to succeed in this New World promised to overcome the Old World constraints imposed by the European aristocracy and create a new American "natural aristocracy of talent and virtue" (Jefferson, 1813). The American colonists and their successors cherished the political freedom from feudalistic reigns and celebrated the individual's potential to achieve a position in society reflecting the individual's merit. Moreover, exploration and expansion of the western frontier selectively favored another specific element in American

individualism, the strong optimism and reliance on one's strengths ("can do" attitude) to capitalize on the opportunity provided in the face of hardship, obstacles, and constraints to upward social mobility.

The notion that everyone can make it to the top, inherent in the American Dream, has important consequences, even and especially today under heightened pressure from economic turmoil. The *prospect of upward mobility* hypothesis (Bénabou & Ok, 2001) proposes that even those at lower income levels will not strongly advocate for income redistribution because of the prevailing belief that they themselves stand a chance to climb the social ladder. Thus, the American Dream and its meritocratic conceptions are the ideological glue that has kept Americans at all rungs of the social ladder willing to tolerate the substantial inequality of life outcomes. Increasingly, this ideology is clashing with reality, as we discuss later.

In contrast to the United States, European history set up a different approach to social inequality. European societies embrace social inequality, causing individuals within these societies to view themselves as socially stratified into owners and workers, employers and employees. The individual agent in European societies does not aspire to embark on a lonely struggle up the social ladder but rather views him- or herself at a certain and unalterable place in a socially stratified society (Geissler & Meyer, 2006; Kleining & Moore, 1968; Moore & Kleining, 1960). This is not to say that Europeans have no hope to improve their lot in life and do not work to enhance their standard of living and their children's future. Instead, we are arguing that in many European countries individuals largely forego the striving for social mobility and replace it with a notion of belonging to, identifying with, and fighting for the interests of their own social strata or class (Bourdieu, 1982; Kleining & Moore, 1968). European history is saturated with the struggle between the classes of capitalist owners on the one hand and workers on the other (Bourdieu, 1982; Marx, 1958). European history has also given rise to powerful unions and socialist, social-democratic, and communist parties of the working class in all major European countries. These movements have fought for better working conditions, higher salaries, health care, and pensions, and have demanded from the government in welfare what they could not directly wrangle from the employers. Thus, in most European welfare states, meritocratic principles are ameliorated by highly

esteemed values of protecting the less fortunate, be it via governmentally managed entitlements as in Scandinavian countries, collective bargaining contracts as in Germany and France, or via family and community support (Italy, Spain, Ireland; see Blossfeld et al., 2007).

As a consequence of the different historical roots of European societies, the dominant ideology in Europe is not one of unlimited social mobility for each individual, but one of unequal opportunities for those at the top and those at the bottom that need to be compensated for by policies, services, and monetary support for those at the lower rungs of the social ladder. Under the current conditions of increasing constraints to government-funded welfare systems, people at the lower rungs of society and especially the marginalized youth in those countries with the weakest economies (e.g., Spain, Italy, Greece) are not inclined to blame themselves for a lack of success in climbing the social ladder, but will instead protest against inequality and threaten those holding political power in their countries.

### How Social Structure and Institutions Set up the Action Field for Individuals' Developmental Agency

When thinking about the way in which a system can regulate change along a time-ordered path, a key model from developmental biology comes to mind, Waddington's *epigenetic landscape* (1942; 1957). In Figure 33.6, developmental paths of a cell are shown as golf balls on a landscape. The cells start out from similar states (omnipotent state) and then, due to partitions in the hilly landscape, take either one of two valleys pushed by relatively minor environmental forces at the decision point; then the ball (cell) runs down the valley until it comes to another decision point, and so on and so forth throughout the cell's development. The developmental outcomes of two cells after several distinct paths are taken at decision points becomes exponentially more different than the point of origin and first decision because the paths through the valleys take the cells (balls) further and further away from each other.

Moreover, as Figure 33.7 shows, epigenetic landscapes can be monostable (only one path is favored by the landscape), bistable (two paths are favored), or multistable (more than two paths are favored). The multistable canalization reflects the situation in the German educational system with its three-tiered structure: a 10-grade *Hauptschule* leading into lower level, blue-collar (construction, baker, hairdresser) apprenticeships; a more



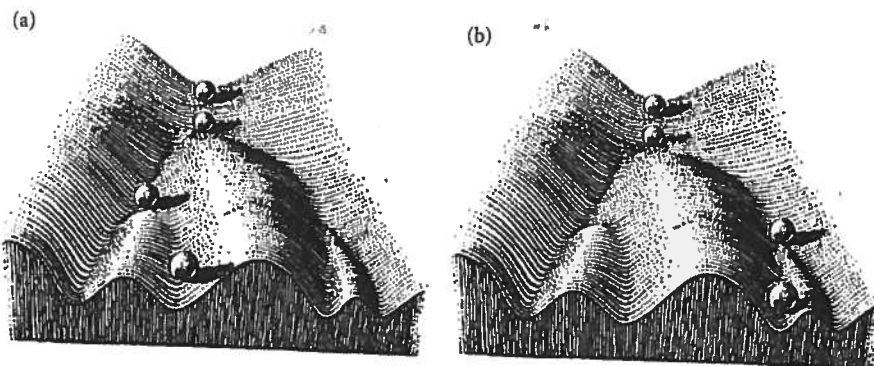


Fig. 33.6 Canalization of developmental processes: Waddington's epigenetic landscape (Waddington, 1957).

challenging 10-grade *Realschule* leading into medium (electrician, car mechanic) or higher level, white-collar (insurance, banking) apprenticeships; and a 12/13-grade *Gymnasium* leading to university admission and higher level apprenticeships. Finally, the landscape between the valley paths can be more or less mountainous (see high vs. low profile in Figure 33.8). If the hills between the valley paths are high and steep, it is more difficult to leave a given path. Under these high-profile conditions, the system as a whole is more stable but also provides less opportunities for individual agents to change paths after a decision point.

The decision points in these epigenetic landscapes can be likened to developmental transitions when the individual can take different paths. The transition to adulthood is an important and probably the most consequential developmental transition in the life course. It is during the transition to adulthood that individuals have a chance to venture away from their parents' social status.

Most modern societies hold a large potential for social mobility, so that individuals face major chances for upward but also risks of downward social mobility, both within an individual's life course and between generations. However, certain characteristics of societies can enable or constrain individuals' chances to move up the social ladder (Buchholz et al., 2009; Heckhausen, 1999). First, there are *sociostructural constraints* that pertain to the social inequality of access to important resources for social mobility, for example, access to high-quality schools and colleges. Corak (2013) argues that the main driving factors for increasingly constrained social mobility are associated with, as the economist puts it, "the human capital of children" (Corak, 2013, p. 80). Higher incomes provide access to better neighborhoods, better child care facilities, and better schools, tipping the balance in the favor of children from higher income groups. Put into the context of the epigenetic landscape model, this

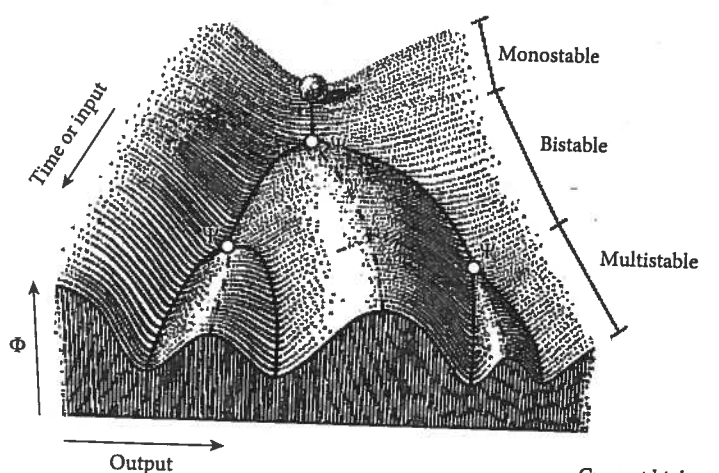


Fig. 33.7 Different phases of epigenetic canalization.



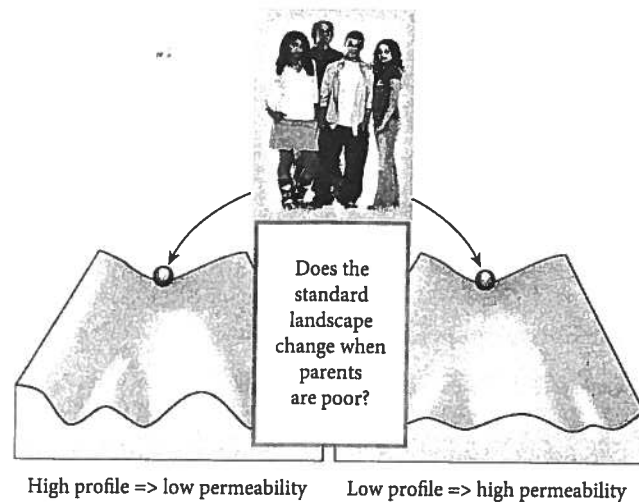


Fig. 33.8 High versus low profiles in epigenetic landscapes.

means that pronounced social inequality may create substantial obstacles to social mobility by preventing the individual from moving from one path to the other.

Another important societal influence in social mobility comes from *institutional constraints*. For instance, the German K-12/13 education system is organized into three tiers after grade 4 (or in some states grade 6). Switching between different tiers is difficult, albeit not impossible. Again, these different kinds of constraints in the German educational system may constitute obstacles between paths that render switching from one stable path to another close to impossible.

The third potentially constraining influence on social mobility comes from internalized ideologies about social inequality and beliefs about the causes of upward and downward social mobility (see detailed discussion earlier). The dominant American ideology, with its notions of plentiful opportunities for everyone, individualistic explanations of success and failure in life, and the acceptance of unequal rewards (Huber & Form, 1973) seems ideal for fostering strong and sustained individual striving for upward mobility. However, to the extent that these social mobility goals may be unrealistic, such striving may well become continuously frustrated and thus ultimately depleted. On the other hand, continued and strong striving might bear better outcomes than confining oneself to what seems to be more realistic goals with less steep ambitions for social climbing. The challenge for research in this area is to identify the societal and economic conditions under which either of these statements is true.

### ***Transition to Adulthood: Opportunities and Constraints in Different Societies***

In general, life course transitions are those phases of life most sensitive to the interplay between sociostructural conditions and an individual agent's capacities (e.g., effort, ability, self-regulated goal pursuit). It is during transitions that individuals can exert their greatest effect on their own future life course (Heckhausen, 1999). Transitions provide chances for growth and upward social mobility, as well as risks for decline and downward mobility, thus reflecting the society's general potential for social mobility as well as the specific mobility potential of the particular transition in question.

If transitions in general hold the promise of amplifying individuals' influence on their own future, this holds true even more for the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In this transition, adolescents' dependency on their family of origin wanes as they establish their own career and family as an adult. The transition to adulthood concentrates social mobility because it is both a critical transition within a life course and between generations as young adults leave the parental social context and strive to attain their own. The transition to adulthood also amplifies any differences in psychological and social resources that individual youth bring to the challenge. And it is also during this transition that individuals' are most vulnerable to adverse effects of the historical, economic, or social context, as was shown by Glen Elder in his pioneering analysis of children's life courses during and after the Great Depression (Elder, 1974).

Different nations and their societal structuring of the transition to adulthood differ greatly in several major respects: (1) the extent to which the transition and its stations are predetermined by established institutions of school education, vocational training, and modes of entry into the labor market; (2) the extent to which the adolescent can influence the transition and, in fact, needs to take an active role; and (3) the consequences the transition has for an individual's long-term career prospects. Regarding the latter, we find, for instance, more restricted mobility in Germany compared to the United States after entering a career. This difference in career permeability greatly affects the long-term implications of the early adulthood transition into work life because early gains or losses in social status have more long-term consequences under conditions of low career track permeability.

#### UNIFIED VERSUS SEGREGATED INSTITUTIONS FOR EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Regarding the structure imposed by educational and vocational institutions, the more unified and universally institutionalized the path across the transition from school to work (e.g., the German dual system of apprenticeship concurrent with formal education), the less influence that individuals' varying social and cultural resources and self-regulatory motivational capacities have on their eventual social status attainment. Thus, unified educational (one school for all) and vocational (centrally and professionally regulated apprenticeship training) institutions can be expected to weaken the translation of social inequality from individuals' family-of-origin to their social status as an adult. An inverse effect should result from educational and vocational institutions that segregate and thus enhance social inequality. A telling example is the three-tiered German school system with its early point of diversion (Schnabel, Alfeld, Eccles, Köller, & Baumert, 2002). Here, the German school system with its three-tier segregation makes for a particularly pronounced accumulation of social inequality across the school career. In contrast, the unified high school system in the United States, albeit maintaining social differentiation, shows less amplification of social background influences by allowing greater permeability between educational trajectories.

Institutionally or socially structured segregated paths into adult employment hold the promise of a life trajectory of opportunities along the canalized

path. This is advantageous for those on track because their development and career are buffered against disturbances, much like the golf balls in Waddington's epigenetic model that roll securely in their crevices (Waddington, 1942; 1957). But, at the same time, the canalized paths into work life can become dead ends and alleys into poverty and social exclusion, as compellingly demonstrated for the marginalized youth in British society by Bynner and Parsons (2002).

One of the most highly structured school-to-work transitions is the dual vocational training system (*Duales Ausbildungssystem*) in Germany that is best tailored to the graduates of the German middle-tier high school (*Realschule*). After completing the 10th grade of *Realschule*, the 16-year-old *Realschul*-graduates set out to secure one of the cherished positions as an apprentice in a local business. Employers willing to offer these apprenticeships go by school grades, entry tests, and interviews when selecting from a large applicant pool. Apprenticeships vary widely in social prestige (different income, long-term promotions prospects, and social respect). As a consequence, the best strategy to secure an optimal vocational training position is to calibrate one's apprenticeship ambitions to one's school grades, and that is exactly what we found in the German context. The *Realschul*-graduates closely calibrated the social prestige of the apprenticeship they aspired to with their own school grades, a process that unfolded during their final year in school when finding an apprenticeship became increasingly urgent (Heckhausen & Tomasik, 2002). Moreover, those youth who were most committed to finding an apprenticeship adopted the following strategy of sequential goal adjustment in terms of social prestige of apprenticeship: start fairly ambitious, then adjust downward when you experience failure (unsuccessful applications) and upward as soon as you have secured at least one position (Tomasik, Hardy, Haase, & Heckhausen, 2009).

Strong and sustained engagement with a particular goal—here finding an appropriate apprenticeship—is highly normative in these strongly canalized pathways. So much so that, for example, those *Realschul* graduates who took longer to become active in applying for apprenticeships ended up extremely worried and hurried late in their final year before graduating (Nagy, Hollube, Wolf, Köller, & Heckhausen, 2005). Moreover, those who supplemented their goal engagement with self-regulatory efforts to enhance their

volitional commitment benefitted at least in their subjective well-being (girls and boys), and objective apprenticeship attainments (girls; see Haase, Heckhausen, & Köller, 2008). And such extra volitional self-regulation was even able to offset the detrimental effects of highly stressful life events such as a death in the family or parents' divorce on one's goal engagement for an apprenticeship (Poulin & Heckhausen, 2007).

As we explained earlier, in the United States, the transition into work life is weakly structured and thus probably more influenced by informal advantages and disadvantages of social class (Hamilton, 1990; Heckhausen, 2002). However, the path through the educational system is highly normative, with one type of school for everyone, albeit the quality of the school may vary across very unequal neighborhoods and schools. Nevertheless, the generally accepted path in American society is one from high school to college and from college into a career on some socially upward trajectory. In some parts of the United States, such as California, this notion is even institutionalized, as in the California Master Plan of Higher Education (California State Board of Education, 1960). Although other states offer similar educational structures, California is unique in the degree to which it provides a systematic and scaffolded progression from high school to community college to university. Youth, even those from socially disadvantaged families and high schools, can enroll in community colleges and from there transfer to California State Universities or even to one of the research-oriented Universities of California. Accordingly, individuals' goal engagement with highly ambitious educational goals (e.g., get a bachelor's degree at a research university) is generally very high and carries even those youth who started out with less than stellar prospects to greater success than those who adjust their aspirations to more modest educational goals (e.g., get an associate's degree from a community college; see Heckhausen & Chang, 2009). As it turns out, such engagement with educational goals in order to be successful needs to be focused exclusively on education, instead of simultaneously entertaining ideas about one's desired career outcomes (Heckhausen, Chang, Greenberger, & Chen, 2012).

#### **SOCIETAL UNDERREGULATION ENHANCES INFLUENCE OF INDIVIDUAL RESOURCES**

Another way by which social inequality is preserved and perhaps even amplified is through a system of underregulation that renders informal and

noninstitutionalized differences decisive for the entry into an adaptive career. Such informal differences could pertain to such sociocultural resources as upper-class-oriented social networks and a set of behaviors, values, and beliefs associated with the upper rungs of the social ladder (Bourdieu, 1982; Corak, 2013; Heckhausen, 2011). This may well be the case for the "forgotten half" of high school graduates in the United States who do not go on to college but seek employment in primary and secondary labor markets.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Hamilton (1990) argues that the "floundering period" endured by these adolescents bears great risks for them and may be the cause of many social and psychological problems, including teenage pregnancies, drug abuse, and delinquency. It is within such underregulated circumstances that individual agency and the different resources the individual can mobilize for goal pursuit play a greater role than in any other societal constellation.

In our own empirical work, we have investigated career-related goal pursuit among recent high school graduates (Shane, Heckhausen, Lessard, Chen, & Greenberger, 2012), university students (Shane & Heckhausen, 2013), and young and middle-aged adults (Shane & Heckhausen, 2012). Among the high school graduates, we found that strong beliefs in the influence of such controllable factors as one's own effort and social contacts positively influence control striving for career goals (Shane et al., 2012). In contrast, those recent graduates who believed that luck is decisive for entering a career successfully were not spurred on to greater control striving for their career goal.

When it comes to the transition from college to career, students hold ambitious aspirations for climbing the social ladder and attaining substantially higher socioeconomic status than their parents. Similar to what we found for recent high school graduates, among these university graduates control-related beliefs are predictive of control strivings (Shane & Heckhausen, 2013). Specifically, we identified two pathways: those who believe that a successful transition into work life is a function of their own effort and ability versus those who believe it is a function of uncontrollable luck. The meritocratic view of personal control over the transition seems to promote career engagement and more prestigious career expectations. In contrast, the more fatalistic view of the transition into work life was associated with tendencies to disengage from career goals.

Additional empirical support for the influence of individual motivational resources on the

establishment of a career during the transition to adulthood comes from the longitudinal Youth Development Study, covering the span from 18 to 31 years (Vuolo, Staff, & Mortimer, 2012). The study finds that young adults who maintain high ambition and certainty about their long-term career goals managed to maintain employment and attain higher hourly wages even during the recession years in 2008/2009. Finally, using long-term follow-up data from the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study, we find that among adults in established careers, strong engagement in the work domain is informed by perceptions about the controllability of career improvements, as our theory's congruence principle (i.e., congruence between perceived control and control striving) predicts (Shane & Heckhausen, 2012). Moreover, individuals who base their work-related engagement on strong perceived controllability attain better work-related and health outcomes 9 years later. In contrast, those who invest heavily in the work domain even though they do not see much chance for control end up suffering negative consequences for their mental and physical health, although they may still be successful in climbing the career ladder.

#### **MERITOCRATIC BELIEFS CLASH WITH UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL CLASSES**

The widening gap in access to personal, social, and cultural resources in the past two decades have meant that close to 50% of the US population has at best severely limited chances for upward mobility (Economic Mobility Project, 2012). Intergenerational transmission of income inequality in United States is substantially greater compared to, for example, Germany (Economic Mobility Project, 2007), despite the more segregating educational system in Germany. Yet polls still show that a greater percentage of Americans (i.e., 69%) are convinced that people get rewarded for intelligence and skills as well as effort (61%), whereas in other countries only 39% (28%, respectively) endorse such an answer. Only 19% of US respondents stated that it is essential to come from a wealthy family to get ahead, whereas in non-US countries, 28% thought so (Economic Mobility Project, 2007).

One can only wonder how long this gap between dominant meritocratic ideology and economic reality can be sustained. At some point, the realities of an unparalleled surge in social inequality, the economic downturn, and the enormous

and continued increase in college tuition are likely to undermine the younger generation's trust in the American Dream and its meritocratic conceptions and thus render the delicate balance of unrealistic beliefs and conflicting individual experiences untenable. Indeed, recent polls suggest that only 16% of recent university graduates believe that their generation will achieve more financial success than the previous generation, and a little less than half expect to personally attain more financial success than their parents (Stone, Van Horn, & Zukin, 2012). This pessimism is echoed by older generations, of whom only 47% believe that their children will attain a higher standard of living than they themselves attained compared to 62% in 2009 (Economic Mobility Project, 2011), and 82% believe that finding employment is harder for today's young adults than it was for previous generations (Taylor et al., 2012).

One is reminded of Bourdieu's phrase of the "betrayed generation" when talking about the bleak career prospects for graduates of Europe's universities after the mass expansion of university enrollment in the 1960s and '70s. Today, the future prospects of European and American youth is everything but promising. And in the United States, an adherence to the American Dream adds insult to injury because it implies that a failure to march up the social ladder is the individual youth's fault. It does not seem likely that the ideological pacification of the American Dream and its meritocratic ideas about the cause of social mobility will work for much longer.

#### **Conclusion**

Human society has developed to be structured in terms of different social strata having unequal access to resources. Societies differ in opportunities for social mobility; that is, the degree to which an individual can move up or down the social ladder, both within an individual's lifespan and across family generations. Extreme social inequality constrains social mobility, especially for the lowest and highest social strata (Corak, 2013). Individual agents in different societies across historical time and place have had widely varying opportunities to exert their own influence on their social status. Moreover, individual agency is the most influential during life phases of transition, and, in the case of social mobility in modern societies, the critical phase occurs during the transition into adulthood, although some societies allow for some mobility in adulthood itself.



Individual agency is fueled by the basic motive to exert control over one's environment and one's own future. Striving for such primary control is organized into cycles of goal selection, goal engagement, and goal disengagement as opportunities fade or goal striving becomes too costly. During phases of goal engagement, behavioral and motivational investment should be selective and focused. When encountering strong reasons to disengage, such disengagement should be discrete and organized rather than gradual or oscillating. Disengagement from a given overly ambitious goal allows the reinvestment of behavioral and motivational resources into either adjusted (somewhat less ambitious) goals or into entirely different goals pertaining to different domains of life and functioning.

Individuals can select goals based on general expectations about timing during the lifespan that are based on biological changes and societal institutionalization of educational and career-related milestones (e.g., school graduation, vocational training, retirement). Beyond these general patterns, goal setting of youth in the transition after high school and into college and vocational careers has been found to reflect specific characteristics of a given society. In particular, goal calibration can be narrow under conditions of highly transparent and specific career entry requirements (e.g., by employers offering apprenticeships in Germany) and extremely ambitious for longer term goals that are supported by institutionalized ladder-type scaffolds (e.g., California Master Plan of Higher Education). Consequences of initial outcomes in the youth-to-adulthood transition also vary by society. Some societies allow more change between developmental (educational, career) paths during adulthood, thus providing a multistable epigenetic landscape. Other societies offer less permeability after young adulthood and thus provide more narrowly canalized trajectories of education and career development throughout adulthood.

It is striking that dominant ideologies about social mobility do not or only partially reflect the reality in a given society and, in important cases, stand in stark contrast to existing patterns of social mobility. In line with unified educational institutions (the high school system) in the United States, American youths cherish high educational and career ambitions corresponding with the "American Dream." Yet actual opportunities for upward mobility are severely restricted for the lower social strata, partly because of the stark differences in income, but not least because the social

inequality in neighborhoods and commensurate constraints to high schools can turn even unified educational institutions into conduits of social segregation. In addition, the transition into work life is severely underregulated and thus renders youth from lower social strata especially vulnerable to the effects of informal inequalities in access to financial resources and particularly to social capital in terms of important social connections and *comme-if-faut* behavioral patterns (Bourdieu, 1982).

It is a fascinating challenge for ongoing (Haase, Heckhausen, & Silbereisen, 2012; Heckhausen & Shane, October 2012; Shane & Heckhausen, 2012; October 2012; Shane & Heckhausen, May 2013) and future research to longitudinally examine how today's youth wrestle with overly ambitious expectations of social mobility as it conflicts with increasingly constrained opportunities. Over the past three decades, most countries have moved toward greater inequality and the associated higher obstacles to social mobility (see Figures 33.4 and 33.5). These developments have the potential to undermine beliefs in meritocracy and the confidence of a majority in the effectiveness of personal agency within the societies they live in. Far from leading to resignation and submission, many, and especially the young, have chosen to deepen and widen the striving for primary control, from striving for control over one's life to a striving for control over one's society (Heckhausen, 2010). And so the transactional efforts of individuals to enhance their opportunities in life may join forces with the leverage of the collective and develop the kind of power that can overcome undue societal constraints of lifespan development, reaching far beyond the individual's immediate social ecology.

## Notes

- 1 For an elaborate discussion of modes of control and culture, see Heckhausen and Schulz (1999) and Schulz and Heckhausen (1999).
- 2 The Gini coefficient is a standard indicator of income inequality that can range from 0 (each member of a community gets an identical income) to 1 (all income goes to one person).
- 3 Of Americans 25 years of age or older, 85.7% have at least a high school degree, and 28.5% have a bachelor's degree or higher (US Census Bureau, 2013). In 2010, 41% of 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in a postsecondary school, an increase from 35% in 2000 (US Department of Education, 2012). In 2005, 59% of first-time university students in America who attended a 4-year degree program full-time completed the program within 6 years (US Department of Education, 2013).



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