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Lisa J. Crockett

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, ecrockett1@unl.edu

Rainer K. Silbereisen

Friedrich-Schiller University of Jena

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Negotiating Adolescence in Times of Social Change

Edited by

LISA J. CROCKETT

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

RAINER K. SILBEREISEN

Friedrich-Schiller University of Jena



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Preface

The decline of the Socialist governments in Eastern and Central Europe and the resulting political and economic reorganizations of the 1990s provided a dramatic illustration of the far-reaching effects of social change. For social scientists interested in the health and well-being of youth, such instances of social upheaval raise questions of how young people are affected socially and psychologically by societal changes, and whether their development is compromised or enhanced. Further, if social change compromises development, the additional question arises as to what can be done to sustain healthy development in times of social change. The answers to these questions have important implications for our future in a global community because the youth of today are the adults of tomorrow. As we stand on the brink of a new century and take stock of the old one, addressing these questions seems especially timely. This was the impetus for the present volume.

In February 1996, a diverse group of social scientists (psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists) from Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States convened at the Pennsylvania State University to discuss the ways in which social change may affect adolescent development, the likely consequences for adolescent functioning and well-being, and the kinds of social interventions needed to support healthy development in a changing society. Entitled "Negotiating Adolescence in Times of Social Change," the conference was organized to consider the abrupt and more gradual social changes affecting Western industrialized countries. Drawing on the ecological and life course perspectives, we were especially interested in the processes through which societal changes exert an impact on (1) the course of adolescent development and (2) adolescents' social and psychological adjustment. Additionally, we sought to identify individual and contextual factors that can modify the impact of social change and enhance the likelihood of a successful transition to adulthood. The conference presentations formed the basis of the present volume, and we have retained the conference format in which some presenters focused on their own research and others provided integrative commentaries. The original presentations have been revised, however, in the light of discussions and exchanges that occurred during and following the conference.

Many people contributed to planning the conference and preparing this volume. The conference was initiated as part of an ongoing exchange program between the Department of Human Development and Family Studies of the Pennsylvania State University (United States) and the Department of Developmental Psychology of the Friedrich-Schiller University of Jena (Germany). The two departments fund the exchange program, and we are greatly indebted to them for their support of the program and the conference. We would also like to thank the German Research Council for its generous support of the German presenters, all of whom were participating in a Council-funded research initiative titled "Childhood and Adolescence in Germany Before and After Unification." Finally, we would like to acknowledge the contributions of several individuals who played an important role in the conference and the resulting volume. We are indebted to Leann Birch, who was instrumental in funding the conference and the exchange program; to Fred Vondracek for his help in identifying an excellent group of presenters; and to Sheila Bickle, who kept track of numerous organizational and logistical details in preparation for the conference. We also wish to thank Annett Weise, Katrin Mueller, Verona Christmas, and Jennifer Wyatt for their valuable help in preparing for the conference and editing the book. Most of all, we are indebted to the authors of the chapters for their exciting insights and ideas, their openness to feedback, and their contributions to lively discussions at the conference.

Lisa J. Crockett and Rainer K. Silbereisen