Personal goals at age 25 in three generations of the twentieth century: Young adulthood in historical context1

Article *in* Swiss Journal of Psychology · June 2001

DOI: 10.1024//1421-0185.60.2.59

CITATIONS
20

READS
488

3 authors:

Adrian Bangerter
Université de Neuchâtel
129 PUBLICATIONS **3,894** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Alexander Grob
University of Basel
183 PUBLICATIONS **4,938** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Franciska Krings
University of Lausanne
69 PUBLICATIONS **2,258** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Swiss Journal of Psychology 60 (2), 2001, 59–64

Personal goals at age 25 in three generations of the twentieth century: Young adulthood in historical context[1]

Adrian Bangerter[1], Alexander Grob[2], Franciska Krings[2]

[1] Stanford University
[2] University of Bern

The possibility of a historically determined shift in developmental tasks of young adulthood was investigated. Personal goals at age 25 of participants from three cohorts spanning twentieth-century Swiss history were studied in an interview combining current and retrospective measures. Members of the oldest cohort (Between the Wars) were born beween 1920 and 1925. Members of the middle cohort (Early Baby Boomers) were born between 1945 and 1950. Members of the youngest cohort (Generation X) were born between 1970 and 1975. Results show significant shifts in goal content which reflect well-documented historical changes. For example, BTW participants mainly mention work- and family-related goals (corresponding to classical developmental tasks). However, GEX participants mention more goals related to education and leisure, and less family-related goals than earlier generations. This suggests that classical formulations of developmental tasks of young adulthood (e.g. starting work, founding a family) may be less adequate today.

Key words: Goals, young adulthood, developmental tasks, societal change

Goal constructs (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Emmons, 1986; Little, 1989) occupy a central role in psychology. They have emerged as powerful explanatory factors, particularly in research on personality and motivation. However, throughout the literature, goals are investigated as mental representations of desired end states. Although it has been often acknowledged that goals are embedded in social contexts (Little, 1989; Smith, 1996), there is little research on this question. Furthermore, there has been almost no research on how changes in these contexts (e.g. historical changes) affect goal setting. The present article is an initial exploration of this question. We focus on how personal goals correspond to normative expectations concerning personal development, e.g. developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1948), and on how these expectations themselves vary through historical change. We examine developmental tasks of young adulthood as reflected in the personal goals of participants from three pivotal generations

1 This research was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation within the Swiss Priority Program "Switzerland: Towards the Future" (Project no. 5004-47766). We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier version of this manuscript and Christian Staerklé for valuable advice.

of twentieth-century Swiss society, showing significant shifts in these goals which reflect well-documented societal changes.

Developmental tasks of young adulthood

Developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1948) are sets of requirements relevant for development which persons have to master at specific ages. They include components such as knowledge about socially desirable goals, models about how to achieve them, and normative standards and age deadlines. Success in resolving developmental tasks leads to increased well-being and social acceptance, and facilitates resolution of later developmental tasks; whereas failure leads to diminished well-being and social acceptance, and hinders resolution of later developmental tasks.

The period of young adulthood is a time where many goals that are central for personal development are first formed. In this respect, it has been repeatedly observed that personal goals of adolescents correspond to developmental tasks of young adulthood (Nurmi, 1991). Adolescents are capable of comparing their own life courses to normative benchmarks (Malmberg & Norrgård, 1999). Furthermore, third-parties, e.g. adults, also hold normative expectations about developmental tasks of adolescents (Berger, Grob & Flammer, 1999; Flammer & Avramakis, 1992; Grob, Flammer & Rhyn, 1995).

But what exactly are the developmental tasks of young adulthood? Classical formulations (Havighurst, 1953, pp. 259–267) include "selecting a mate", "learning to live with a marriage partner", "starting a family", "rearing children", "managing a home", "getting started in an occupation", "taking on civic responsibility", and "finding a congenial social group". These are standard assumptions in many developmental psychology textbooks (e.g. Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Stevens-Long & Cobb, 1983; Oerter & Montada, 1998), despite the fact that Havighurst's work dates from the 1950s. Do such formulations adequately describe the developmental tasks faced by young adults today? We will argue that they are outdated, by placing the period of young adulthood in the context of the changing sociohistorical conditions which have governed the twentieth century.

Young adulthood in historical context

Normative developmental expectations can vary as a result of societal change (Hareven, 1986; Riley, 1986). Such change has deep effects on social structures and therefore on the different social settings in which development occurs (e.g. Fend, 1988), and finally on individual development itself. Examining such processes means adopting the standpoint of historical developmental psychology. In this respect, Koops & Elder (1996) identify two levels of analysis: the cultural-historical level (change over centuries) and the sociological-historical level (change during the 20th century). The second level of analysis is adopted in the present study. The main element of change assumed to affect goal setting can be described as an increasing standardization of the life course.

Kohli (1985) offers an account of several aspects of structural change (individualization) in Western societies since the middle of the 19th century leading to what he calls the institutionalization and standardization of the life course. First, there is the general decline in mortality beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century. This had the effect of isolating the occurrence of death in very old age. As a result, the life course became predictable and subject to planning. Second, several aspects of change in the life cycle of the family took place. Third, changes in legal and societal structures such as the introduction of age-graded normative systems (e.g., education, work, retirement) organized the modern life course along the dimension of chronological age.

According to various accounts, this trend has been unfolding over the course of the twentieth century. Two generations which embody different perspectives on this change are, on the one hand, the generation having experienced the Second World War, and on the other hand, the Baby Boom generation born after the war. However, further developments since the seventies such as civil unrest, the Vietnam war, economic crises, changes in family structure and work, a growing heterogeneity of life styles, a blossoming of subcultures and rapidly changing values have led to speculation that the institutionalization trend has come to a halt or even reversed (Held, 1986; Kohli, 1986). Various labels for this phenomenon exist, e.g., postmodernity, postindustrial society, or age-irrelevant society (Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976). On a demographic level, this difference in lifestyle and values is embodied by the postwar Baby Boom generation and the so-called Generation X (Coupland, 1991; Williams, Coupland, Folwell & Sparks, 1997).

What are the consequences of such changes for individual development? It seems that, at the beginning of the third millenium in the Western world, the individual is responsible for his or her life course and happiness. Traditional developmental tasks are less dictated by society and less bound to specific ages. Instead, individuals are confronted with the necessity of repeatedly realizing themselves in a new and original manner. They have to construct their own life course by choosing a few distinct goals and projects from a large number of possibilities and decide themselves on appropriate ways to realize them (Grob, Krings & Bangerter, 2001). This contrasts sharply with developmental contexts 25 or 50 years ago.

The present study

In order to assess whether developmental tasks have indeed changed, we analyzed data on personal goals at age 25 from members of three different birth cohorts spanning twentieth-century Swiss history from 1920 onward. The oldest cohort consisted of people born *B*etween *T*he *W*ars (BTW cohort; born 1920–1925). The middle cohort consisted of people who were *E*arly *B*aby *B*oomers (EBB; born 1945–1950). The youngest cohort consisted of people from the "*GE*neration *X*" (GEX; born 1970–1975). BTW participants experienced childhood during a time of economic growth, whereas their late childhood and adolescence was during economic depression and young adulthood during World War II. In contrast, EBB participants experienced childhood and adolescence during postwar economic growth, in parallel with newly emerging family patterns and a shift in female labour force participation. In late adolescence and young adulthood, this cohort experienced women's liberation and the civil unrest of the 1960s. GEX participants were born in a time of economic consolidation. They experienced affluence during childhood, which often resulted in consumerism and materialism in adolescence and young adulthood. However, this cohort was the first which was confronted with ecological problems while they were in adolescence and (due to mass media and increasing worldwide communication) the experience of globalization. These three cohorts can be considered as generations in Mannheim's (1952) sense. Moreover, the positioning of each cohort approximately 25 years apart makes them successive generations, and thus ideal points of entry for assessing historical change and its effects on developmental goal setting.

Method

Participants

Seventy-five participants were recruited by mail from a randomly drawn pool obtained through the administrative register of the city of Berne (twenty-five per cohort; BTW: 14 men, 11 women; EBB: 11 men, 14 women; GEX: 12 men, 13 women; overall response rate = 22.9%). They received CHF 30 for participation.

Many members of the BTW cohort were married (56%), and 20% were widowed. Forty-eight percent had finished secondary school and 30% had attended or finished high school. Sixty-eight percent completed vocational training after school. For the EBB cohort, 36% were married, 28% divorced, and 24% of the non-married persons lived with a partner. Sixty percent finished secondary school and 16% finished high school. Seventy-two percent completed vocational training after school and 16% had a university degree. For the GEX cohort, 56% and 32% reported living with a partner. Fourty-four percent finished secondary and 52% finished high school. After school, 44% completed vocational training and 48% graduated from university or were at university at the time of the study.

Procedure

Depending on their cohort membership, participants were approximately 25, 50, or 75 years old at the time of the study. They reported personal goals at different points over the life span as part of a semi-structured interview which also focused on significant life events and life satisfaction for both the retrospective and prospective life course (Grob et al., 2001). The present analysis focuses exclusively on personal goals around age 25. For this period, goals were either assessed retrospectively (BTW and EBB cohorts) or currently (GEX cohort). BTW and EBB participants were asked to discuss "important personal goals they had when they were around 25 years of age". GEX participants were asked to discuss "important personal goals they currently had". Participants typically stated their goals and then commented on them in various ways. The interviewer wrote the goals down on a card.

Coding

Participants mentioned a total of 230 goals which were coded for content, according to the following categories: Family ("founding a family"), Work ("finding a good job"), Education ("clinical traineeship in hospital"), Time/leisure ("playing the saxophone again"), Health ("living healthier"), Self-related ("staying flexible/tolerant"), Material ("buying a racing bike"), Intimate Relationships ("falling in love, starting a relationship"), Relationships ("keeping one's good circle of friends"), Ideals ("having more time for people in need"), Housing ("moving"), Independence ("standing on one's own feet"), Being Happy ("accepting life as it is"), and Other. Interrater agreement of coding, assessed by comparison of 20% of the data coded by two persons, was very high (Cohen's kappa = .87).

Results

Number of goals mentioned

The mean number of goals mentioned by each participant was analyzed with a 3 (cohort) by 2 (sex) ANOVA, re-

vealing a significant main effect for cohort ($F(2, 69) = 27.0$, $p < .001$). Post hoc analyses (Scheffé tests) revealed that GEX participants mentioned significantly more goals ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.61$) than participants from the EBB ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.04$) and BTW ($M = 2.12$, $SD = .78$) cohorts.

Goal content

Frequencies of different content categories are shown in Table 1 according to cohort and sex. Members of the BTW and EBB cohorts mentioned *work*- and *family*-oriented goals most frequently. These two categories combined constituted approximately half of all mentions, whereas for the GEX cohort they only constituted a quarter of all mentions. However, GEX cohort members most frequently mentioned goals related to *work, education,* and *time/leisure.* Chi-square tests comparing the oldest and youngest cohorts on the four most frequently mentioned categories showed that *family*-related goals declined significantly ($\chi^2(1) = 11.39$, $p = .0007$), whereas mentions related to *education* ($\chi^2(1) = 5.05$, $p = .0247$) and *time/leisure* ($\chi^2(1) = 5.72$, $p = .0168$) increased significantly. Mentions related to *work* did not differ significantly. Also interesting are *self-related* goals, which are mentioned exclusively in the two youngest cohorts, and most frequently by the EBB cohort.

A correspondence analysis was performed on the data in Table 1 (groups by categories) excluding categories with an overall frequency of less than 5 *(social participation, being happy,* and *other).* Results are shown in Figure 1. Two dimensions accounted for a total of 74.9% of the variance. Dimension 1 (55.6% of variance explained) clearly opposes the GEX cohort to the BTW cohort and EBB women, with EBB men in the middle, and can be interpreted as a dimension of traditional versus less traditional goals. GEX participants are associated with *leisure, health,* and *education,* whereas BTW participants are associated with *work* and *family.* The interpretation of dimension 2 (19.2% of variance explained) is less clear, but seems to oppose men to women. Note that gender differences are most marked for the older cohorts (e.g., *work* is associated with men rather than women, and *family* more with women than men) and diminish for the GEX cohorts.

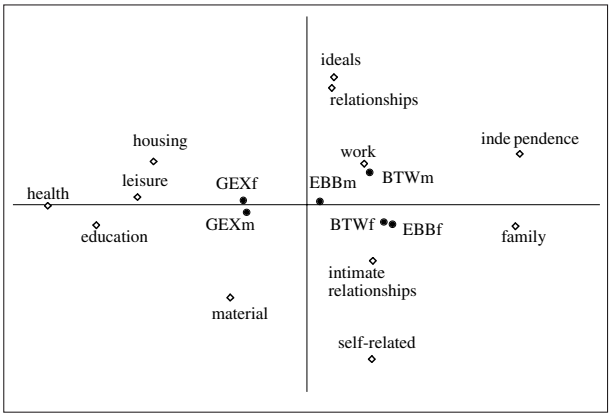

Figure 1: Correspondence analysis of content categories by cohort and sex.
m (e.g. GEXm) = male, f = female

Table 1: Content category frequencies as a function of cohort and sex

	BTW		EBB		GEX	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Work	12	3	8	8	11	9
Family	8	6	4	11	2	6
Relationships	3	0	1	1	2	2
Ideals	3	0	2	1	1	3
Intim. relationships	2	3	2	3	4	3
Independence	2	1	1	1	1	0
Time/leisure	2	0	3	2	8	11
Housing	2	1	0	0	4	5
Education	1	1	2	1	10	11
Material	0	2	3	1	6	2
Other	0	1	0	1	0	0
Self-related	0	0	1	5	3	2
Social participation	0	0	0	1	0	0
Being happy	0	0	0	2	0	0
Health	0	0	1	0	2	3
Total	35	18	28	38	54	57

M = male; F = female.

Discussion

Two main results emerge from the present study. First, GEX participants mentioned more goals than participants from the other two cohorts. This is consistent with the hypothesis of an increasing diversification of developmental pathways that accompanies the observed de-standardization of life courses (Kohli, 1986). GEX participants might feel more empowered (or more obliged) to strive for a larger number of personal goals. However, the result might also reflect that fact that GEX participants reported more current concerns, whereas EBB and BTW participants reported goals that were for them 25 or 50 years in the past.

The primary results come from analyses of goal content, which revealed significant shifts across cohorts. This shows clearly that the classical developmental tasks of young adulthood (Havighurst, 1948, 1953), e.g., founding a family and finding an occupation, are no longer the same today. The goals of the BTW and EBB participants do in-

deed correspond to these two tasks. However, this is not the case for the GEX participants, for whom *work* and especially *family*-related goals are less important. For them, *education* seems to be a current concern instead, alongside goals related to *time/leisure.*

These differences can be plausibly attributed to a number of societal changes in recent decades. First, there is the better access to education. In the course of the interview, many BTW participants (especially women) narrated how it was impossible for them to get an education after finishing school in their late teen years (which they experienced in a time of global economic depression). Instead, they had to enter the work force, often while still living at home. For them, education was no longer a concern when they reached age 25. However, in the postwar years, a time of economic growth, many BTW and EBB participants focused their energy on pursuing professional careers. In contrast, many GEX participants still were pursuing a degree of some kind (including ongoing education) at around age 25. The fragile economic perspectives of recent years as well as unemployment may have induced them to defer entering the work force and concentrate on getting a better education.

A second important shift concerns *family*-related goals, which decrease sharply for GEX participants. This could be related to the longer duration of education. It also probably reflects the well-known shift in childbearing age and the decline in the status of the family in postindustrial nations (Hareven, 1995). Wheareas many BTW and EBB participants founded families between 25 and 30, for GEX participants, this transition is still a comparatively distant reality. Some participants anticipated "deciding for or against children" at around 30 years of age.

A third shift is in the steady increase of goals related to *time/leisure* over cohorts. Although this may reflect current concerns in the case of GEX participants, the increase can also be found for EBB participants, thus probably reflecting societal changes in affluence and lifestyle.

The appearance of *self-related* goals in younger cohorts (especially for EBB women) is also noteworthy. In popular culture, for example in the United States, the Baby Boom generation is attributed a high degree of self-consciousness. In Switzerland, this generation experienced the civil unrest of the late sixties during young adulthood. The historical relevance of this period for this generation is augmented by the fact that, in Switzerland, women first received the right to vote on a federal level in 1971. Frequent mentions of self-related goals for EBB women may reflect this collective experience.

Our design imposes two important limitations on the results, which is why we emphasize the exploratory nature of our study. First, the cross-sectional design combining retrospective with current measures does not allow strict separation of age, cohort, and time effects. Nevertheless, independent accounts (e.g., historical and sociological data) are consistent with our contention (for similar examples dealing with this problem, see Rands & Levinger, 1979; Spini & Lalive d'Epinay, 2000). The second limitation is the sample size, which limits generalizeability. Forthcoming research will address these two problems.

An important question which was not addressed here is the relationship between goals and well-being. Although extensively documented on the *psychological* level, the link between goals and well-being on the *normative* level remains largely unexplored. Developmental tasks are orienting markers for successful development; they therefore normatively define the pursuit of happiness. If, as our results indicate, these markers are evolving, then the question arises as to how individuals perceive the relationships between the pursuit of their personal goals and their own happiness. Does an emerging pressure on self-actualization carry new normative definitions of "the pursuit of happiness"? This question should be a focus of future research.

References

Austin, J.T. & Vancouver, J.B. (1996). Goal constructs in psychology: Structure, process, and content. Psychological Bulletin, 120, 338–375.

Berger, R.P., Grob, A. & Flammer, A. (1999). Gender-role orientation and social expectations regarding female adolescents' coping with developmental tasks. Swiss Journal of Psychology, 58, 273–286.

Coleman, J.C. & Hendry, L.B. (1999). The nature of adolescents. London: Routledge.

Coupland, D. (1991). Generation X: Tales for an accelerated culture. New York: St. Martin's.

Emmons, R.A. (1986). Personal strivings: an approach to personality and subjective well-being. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51, 1058–1068.

Fend, H. (1988). Sozialgeschichte des Aufwachsens. (Social history of growing up.) Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Flammer, A. & Avramakis, J. (1992). Entwicklungsaufgaben: Wo kommen sie her? (Developmental tasks: Where do they come from?) In M. von Cranach, W. Doise & G. Mugny (Eds.), Social representations and the social bases of knowledge (pp. 56–63). Bern: Hogrefe & Huber.

Grob, A., Flammer, A. & Rhyn, H. (1995). Entwicklungsaufgaben als soziale Normsetzung: Reaktionen Erwachsener auf Lösungsmodi von Entwicklungsaufgaben Jugendlicher. (Developmental tasks as social norms: Adults' reactions to adolescents' solving of developmental tasks.) Zeitschrift für Sozialisationsforschung und Erziehungssoziologie, 15, 45–62.

Grob, A., Krings, F. & Bangerter, A. (2001). Life markers in biographical narratives of people from three cohorts: A life span perspective in its historical context. Human Development, 44, 171–190.

Hareven, T.K. (1986). Historical changes in the social construction of the life course. Human Development, 29, 171–180.

Hareven, T.K. (1995). Historical perspectives on the family and aging. In R. Blieszner & V.H. Bedford (Eds.) Handbook of aging and the family. (pp. 13–31). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Havighurst, R.J. (1948). Developmental tasks and education. New York: McKay.

Havighurst, R.J. (1953). Human development and education. New York: Longmans, Green.

Held, T. (1986). Insitutionalization and deinstitutionalization of the life course. Human Development, 29, 157–162.

Kohli, M. (1985). Die Institutionalisierung des Lebenslaufes (The institutionalization of the life course). Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, 37, 1–29.

Kohli, M. (1986). Social organization and subjective construction of the life course. In A.B. Sørensen, F.E. Weinert & L.R. Sherrod (Eds.), Human development and the life course: Multidisciplinary perspectives (pp. 271–292). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Koops, W. & Elder, G.H., Jr. (1996). Historical developmental psychology: Some introductory remarks. International Journal of Behavioral Development, 19, 369–372.

Little, B.R. (1989). Personal project analysis: Trivial pursuits, magnificient obsessions, and the search for coherence. In D. M. Buss & N. Cantor (Eds.), Personality psychology. Recent trends and emerging directions (pp. 15–31). New York, NY: Springer.

Malmberg L.-E. & Norrgård, S. (1999). Adolescents' ideas of normative life-span development and personal future goals. Journal of Adolescence, 22, 33–47.

Mannheim, K. (1952). The problem of generations. In K. Mannheim (Ed.), Essays on the sociology of knowledge (pp. 276–321). London: Routledge & Keegan Paul.

Neugarten, B.N. & Hagestad, G.O. (1976). Age and the life course. In R. Binstock & E. Shanas (Eds.), Handbook of aging and social sciences. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Nurmi, J.-E. (1991). How do adolescents see their future? A review of the development of future orientation and planning. Developmental Review, 11, 1–59.

Oerter, R. & Montada, L. (1998). Entwicklungspsychologie. (Developmental psychology.) Weinheim: Beltz.

Rands, M. & Levinger, G. (1979). Implicit theories of relationship: An intergenerational study. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37, 645–661.

Riley, M.W. (1986). The dynamisms of life stages: Roles, people and age. Human Development, 29, 150–156.

Smith, J. (1996). Planning about life: A social-interactive perspective. In P.B. Baltes & U.M. Staudinger (Eds.), Interactive minds (pp. 242–275). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Spini, D. & Lalive d'Epinay, C. (2000). A comparison of attitudes towards self, life and society among Swiss elders between 1979 and 1994: Disentangling aging and sociocultural factors. In E. Thommen & H. Kilcher (Eds.), Comparer ou prédire: Exemples de recherches comparatives en psychologie aujourd'hui (pp. 177–186). Fribourg: Editions Universitaires.

Stevens-Long, J. & Cobb, N.J. (1983). Adolescents and early adulthood. Palo Alto: Mayfield.

Williams, A., Coupland, J., Folwell, A. & Sparks, L. (1997). Talking about Generation X: Defining them as they define themselves. Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 16, 251–277

Adrian Bangerter

Department of Psychology
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-2130.
E-mail: adrian @psych.stanford.edu