

# Changing Societies, Changing Childhood: Studying the Impact of Globalization on Child Development

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**ABSTRACT**—*Although children are significantly affected by globalization in many ways, there has been little study of its impact on their development. Understanding the effects of the political, economic, and cultural changes associated with globalization requires diverse research strategies designed to (a) provide an impact analysis of the effects of changes associated with globalization on local social ecologies (e.g., families, schools, neighborhoods, health-care system) and on children's everyday experience; (b) examine how globalization influences the knowledge, skills, and forms of learning required of children as cultures are affected by worldwide influences; and (c) explore children's interpretations of these changes for themselves and their future. The specific research strategies suitable to these goals include large-scale social indicators analysis (which can sometimes be drawn from national or international datasets), behavioral studies, document content analyses, ethnographic methods and other approaches to assess specific social practices affecting children, carefully designed child interviews, and coordinated multimethod programs of research that examine the impact of cultural change on children from institutional, societal, and individual perspectives. This article profiles a number of key research challenges and opportunities entailed in the effort to understand how development is shaped, and reshaped, by broader cultural currents.*

**KEYWORDS**—*globalization; developmental ecological systems theory; sociocultural theory; child impact studies; time-series analysis*

American journalists and diplomats on assignment to the most rural parts of Asia and Africa were often stunned when they visited small villages to find young children wearing tattered replicas of Michael Jordan's Bulls jersey. (Halberstam, 1999, pp. 7–8)

The positive and negative effects of globalization on the world economy, culture, and political systems are topics of empirical analysis and interpretive debate. Globalization can be defined as the processes by which the constraints of geography on economic, cultural, and social organization progressively recede (Watson, 1995). Globalization has helped to transform businesses into multinational conglomerates and contributed to the growth of instant global communication, consumerism, and the dissemination of Western values. Globalization is also believed to have exacerbated economic segregation within and between nations, and reactions to globalization have contributed to the rise of fundamentalisms and nationalistic and ethnic ferment.

In light of these changes, the impact of globalization on child development merits research attention. Despite flourishing conceptual and research interest on the impact of global change on youth and adolescence (see, e.g., Arnett, 2002; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000; Larson, Wilson, & Rickman, 2009; Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; Silbereisen & Chen, 2010), little attention has been devoted to the effects of globalization on *children's* development. The purpose of this article was to stimulate interest in this area by outlining some of the conceptual and research approaches that might be taken to understand the changes in developmental influences and outcomes that have been precipitated by the economic, cultural, political, demographic, and technological changes associated with globalization.

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## THE INTERSECTION OF INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

There are several conceptual lenses through which developmental scientists can study the effects of globalization on children. Two complementary approaches guide this analysis. The first is developmental ecological systems theory, which portrays children as embedded in successively broader social ecologies that are mutually influential (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Children are influenced directly and indirectly by changes in cultural values, institutions, and social interactions that occur within these social ecologies, which are increasingly being altered by processes associated with globalization. An especially important feature of developmental ecological systems theory is the concept of the “mesosystem” proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which consists of the interactions between different microsystems (such as families and schools) that include the child and is where globalization influences are likely to have their greatest impact. Other theorists also emphasize the mediating influence of children’s proximal interactions within microsystems, as well as the interactions among these microsystems, in modeling the influence of broader sociocultural processes on their development (e.g., Greenfield, 2009; Verkuyten, 2005).

A second, complementary conceptual lens is provided by sociocultural theory, which claims that psychological growth consists of the appropriation of culturally specific knowledge and tools in interaction with older and more experienced cultural members (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; see also Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1985). In the hands of neo-Vygotskian theorists like Rogoff (1990), this approach highlights the “apprenticeship in thinking” that occurs in children’s interactions with parents, teachers, and others and the ways this apprenticeship changes as these mentors, the social contexts of apprenticeship, and the sociocultural system are all influenced by processes associated with globalization.

These conceptual lenses are useful both for characterizing the levels of social ecology that must be considered in studying globalization and child development, and for delineating the levels of scientific explanation necessary for understanding the effects of globalization on children. These lenses also have significant methodological implications. Different research strategies are relevant to understanding globalization influences at the level of social values, institutional change, informal social interactions, and the interactions among different social ecologies in which the child is embedded.

With these conceptual lenses in mind, the following sections consider different orientations to the study of globalization and children and their methodological implications. First, changes in the everyday lives of children are viewed in a multilevel ecological analysis to consider the direct and indirect ways that changes in broader social processes can influence child development. The impact of globalization on the knowledge, skills,

and forms of learning required of children is considered next to illustrate the kinds of specifically developmental questions posed by globalization. Finally, in recognition that children are active agents in the developmental consequences of globalization, children’s interpretation of their own life experience is discussed.

## CHANGES IN THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF CHILDREN

There are potentially many changes in the everyday lives of children that are associated with globalization. Documenting and describing these changes is an essential first step in understanding their impact. Here are examples of the kinds of questions to be considered (see also Kaufman, Rizzini, Wilson, & Bush, 2002; Thompson, 2002):

1. To what extent are children acquiring access to computers and transnational communications systems such as the Internet, satellite and cable broadcasting, and texting and Twitter feeds (Greenfield & Yan, 2006)? Are children becoming familiar with Western cultural values as a result? How are they responding to these values in relation to indigenous cultural norms?
2. Are the social benefits typically provided by central or local governments—especially those pertaining to health care, food subsidies, and education—affected by changes in national economies related to globalization, including the economic restructuring sometimes required by international lending institutions in recessions? Is the nature or quality of these social benefits affected also by the privatization of health, educational, or welfare institutions or by their deregulation by government agencies? How are these changes in services associated with changes in children’s health status, including infectious diseases, nutritional adequacy, obesity, and injury rates (Adair & Popkin, 2005; Towner & Towner, 2009)?
3. Are political values related to children (e.g., recognition of children’s rights) changing as the consequence of international treaty agreements, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Aitken, Lund, & Kjørholt, 2008; Kaufman, 2002)? To what extent are these legal changes at a legislative level influencing—or being affected by—popular perceptions of public and private responsibilities for child welfare? Do these legal changes affect how families, schools, and communities function in their treatment of children?

These questions—and many others that could also be posed—share several characteristics. First, they concern both opportunities and risks to children associated with globalization. Second, they recognize that global changes influence children by affecting the local social ecologies in which children live, as well as transactions across these ecologies, such as the interactions between families and the health-care or educational systems, the connections among workplace, school, and neighborhood life, and

the linkages between neighborhood well-being and children's peer interactions.

Third, these questions recognize that the effects of global changes on children are moderated in several ways that help to explain their differential impact. Their impact is developmentally moderated, for example, because of how infants, preschoolers, older children, and adolescents are differently affected by their immediate social ecologies and are differentially capable of interpreting and responding constructively to the changes associated with globalization. Economic transitions may affect young children because of the family and child-care conditions associated with parental unemployment, for instance, but for an adolescent, they can have profoundly different implications, such as for educational attainment, work options, and timing of entry into the labor market (Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; Shanahan, Mortimer, & Krüger, 2002). The impact of changes related to globalization is also moderated by socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and religion. Children are differently affected by these changes, for example, on the basis of their access to technology, the kinds of schools they attend, and sub-cultural values. These moderating influences should be considered in describing the impact of globalization on child development.

### CHILD IMPACT STUDIES

Answering questions such as those posed above requires conducting impact studies of various designs concerning the effects of global political and economic change. This research begins with time-series assessments of social indicators that index important features of children's status and living conditions as they are affected by the local changes that can be associated with globalization. For example, some of these questions can be provisionally addressed by examining changes in statistics indexing nutritional status and health care (including immunizations, incidence of disease, child height and weight statistics, and injury and mortality figures), school enrollment and educational attainment, and family residential mobility and income. Other social indicators are changes over time in child poverty rates, public expenditures on children (including changes in benefits paid directly to families with children), child literacy, child hospitalizations owing to injury, youth substance abuse, and child abuse and neglect.

The availability of these data varies significantly for different countries. Public and private agencies in the United States and Europe have long compiled useful large-scale statistical data sets to document the changing status of children over time. Although data-collection efforts are less consistent or comprehensive elsewhere, there has been growing international interest in collecting childhood social indicators, and in some European countries, these indicators are likely to be collected as part of broader assessments of societal well-being (Ben-Arieh, 1999; Ben-Arieh & George, 2006; Ben-Arieh et al., 2001). Relevant

social indicators concerning child well-being can be found in surprising sources; sometimes government agencies collect administrative databases, for example, that are used to monitor the effectiveness of programs for children and families. These constitute hidden resources for developmental scientists interested in large-scale time-series data to describe the conditions of children. Sometimes national census and survey data also yield similar information.

Moreover, a number of international agencies have collected cross-national comparative data concerning the status of children. Among the most comprehensive of these data sets are those published by UNICEF, including *The State of the World's Children*, which presents a variety of statistical indicators of children's well-being for more than 180 nations, and *The Progress of Nations*, which provides international comparisons on various child risk measures. The UNICEF International Child Development Center's MONEE project annual publication *Regional Monitoring Report* provides comparative information about child status for many nations in transition, and also supports a public-use database for secondary data analyses. Other publications by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, the World Health Organization, and Childwatch International also provide large-scale comparative data concerning the well-being of children and youth.

Thus, a variety of data sets are available to developmental scientists who are interested in the effects of globalization on child and youth development, especially if these indicators are connected in time-series analyses to economic and other indicators of societal changes associated with globalization. But these are partial and provisionally useful information sources for several reasons. First, because many social indicators gathered by public or private agencies are not concerned primarily with children, these data can offer only a very indirect glimpse into the conditions affecting children's well-being (Jensen & Saporiti, 1992). Many factors affect trends over time in variables like educational attainment and family income, and these factors can only be surmised on the basis of large-scale survey data and require more incisive follow-up analyses and coordination with other economic and cultural indicators, for which existing data are sometimes inadequate. Second, the reliability of these large-scale survey statistics is often questionable, especially for developing nations and societies with limited data-gathering technology. This means that statistical trends may derive from changes over time in data-collection procedures rather than from actual changes in children's living circumstances, a possibility that must be considered in the interpretation of time-series analyses. Third, these social indicators are, at best, lagging indicators that often track changes in children's social ecologies well after they have occurred. Fourth, these broad indicators can rarely assess influences at the level of the mesosystem (such as changing relations between families and school systems) that can constitute some of the most important indirect influences on children.

For all these reasons, it is important to supplement broad survey data with smaller scale studies using other methods that can provide greater insight into the reasons for observed changes in child social indicators and their consequences. For example, field observations in specific settings may be important for identifying changes over time in practices, such as those involving educational curricula or instructional methods, which derive from shifts in social values concerning childhood. Likewise, changes in the legal status of children in statutory law or procedural justice would be usefully documented through content analyses of public documents and legal proceedings. Qualitative studies, behavioral studies, field observations, document content analyses, and other research procedures are thus essential to account for the processes leading to changes in broad child social indicators and for understanding the consequences of those changes in the everyday lives of children.

There are already some models for how multilevel analyses can permit insight into the processes by which children are affected by the societal changes associated with globalization. Ben-Arieh (2010), for example, studied 172 Israeli Arab and Jewish communities and linked a range of indicators of child well-being to local spending on education and welfare. His analysis also showed how spending was, in turn, predicted by indicators of community functioning, including socioeconomic status, unemployment, population demography, and ethnicity. Although lacking a time-series component, this research program has connected child well-being, changing community characteristics, and priorities in funding for child-oriented initiatives. Applying the family stress model, Conger, Conger and Martin (2010) have examined how children's socioemotional functioning was affected by the family changes deriving from a large-scale downturn in the agricultural economy that affected Midwestern families in the 1980s. Their detailed behavioral analysis connects changes in child functioning to transitions in family economic well-being over time but is less informative concerning broader social and community influences that may have moderated these impacts (but see Simons, Lorenz, Wu, & Conger, 1993). Few existing research programs, in fact, assemble the entire package connecting societal changes, local social ecologies, and family functioning to child outcomes in a longitudinal context because doing so is quite difficult and expensive. As these models illustrate, however, important understanding can be derived even from focused studies on a few parts of this integrated network.

### **DEVELOPING KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND LEARNING IN A CHANGING SOCIETY**

In all cultures and historical periods, childhood is a period of "apprenticeship in thinking" (Rogoff, 1990) that occurs in homes, neighborhoods, and schools. One way of documenting historical and cultural changes to a society is in terms of changing perceptions of the knowledge and skills that children must

master, and this is also true in studying the effects of globalization. Here are examples of the kinds of questions that might be considered:

1. How are the influences of globalization affecting local perceptions of the skills (e.g., literary, mathematical, technological, linguistic) that children must acquire in the educational system? Are there generational or socioeconomic differences in these perceptions? Are educational curricula changing as the consequence of these perceptions (Torney-Purta, Schwille & Amadeo, 1998)?
2. How are the learning tools that children use (such as a computer, Internet access, or literary materials) changing as a consequence of economic development, Westernizing influences, and/or technology? Who is perceived as responsible for providing these tools and educating children in their use?
3. Are economic, technological, and/or cultural changes altering *how* learning occurs, both formally and informally? If so, to what extent does access to technology (e.g., self-paced distance learning) or linguistic capability (i.e., English as a worldwide linguistic currency that permits access to other societies) contribute new learning approaches as well as learning goals?

A vivid illustration of the importance of these questions is Chen and Chen's (2010) documentation of significant changes in parental socialization beliefs and attitudes that have accompanied China's transition to a market-oriented economy, with important implications for which educational skills and characteristics of children are valued (see also Chen, Bian, Xin, Wang, & Silbereisen, 2010). One implication of the changes in knowledge, skills, and learning resulting from globalization is that children who have facility only with traditional tools and practices may be left behind by those who can remain current with cultural and economic transitions. Another implication is that the knowledge and skills learned in childhood may not necessarily have life-long utility, and the capacity to flexibly identify and acquire updated competencies must increasingly be part of the skills developed by children. Moreover, as the perceived permeability of national boundaries increases (the European Common Market is one illustration, the Arab Spring another), the capacity to work with others living in different cultures and languages becomes increasingly necessary.

Exploring these and related questions will require multimethod research strategies that coordinate research on the impact of cultural change at several levels of analysis. Many of the research approaches described earlier are relevant. Document content analyses of changes in educational policies over time can be complemented by interviews with key educational decision makers and classroom observations of how these changes are implemented. These methods should be coordinated in time-series analyses with information concerning changing public perceptions about the knowledge and skills that will be required in the future. Such information can be obtained through survey instru-

ments, as well as through content analyses of popular media reports about children and education. It is also necessary, of course, to gather information concerning the attitudes and beliefs of individuals from different generational cohorts and different socioeconomic groups. Concerning the former, intergenerational relationships are also altered as the result of changes associated with globalization and the different generational stake involved in adapting to them (Yi & Farrell, 2006). Consequently, to evaluate the impact of technological, cultural, and economic changes on these perceptions, it is important to assess the perspectives of multiple generations on the nature of the knowledge and skills that children require.

### CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR LIFE EXPERIENCE

Children of all ages actively strive to comprehend their experiences. When they live in societies characterized by rapid cultural, political, and economic change, their interpretations of these changes significantly influence their impact. For example, societal transitions, such as those that have occurred in the Middle East, pose significant challenges to the development of children's self-awareness, understanding of social roles and institutions, and expectations for the future. This makes it important to understand how children interpret and internalize these experiences.

Here are some of the questions that might be considered in studying the impact of global political and economic change on how children comprehend their own life experience:

1. How does the enhanced awareness of other societies (fostered by access to transnational communication systems, revised educational curricula, and Westernizing trends in popular culture and the media) affect children's views of their own life conditions (Bloch & Lemish, 2003; Schlegel, 2000)? Does an awareness of the economic disparities within and between nations, for example, affect how children regard their own socioeconomic conditions?
2. What do children expect for their future, and how is it influenced by their awareness of the political, economic, and cultural changes they observe around them? Do these societal changes alter children's expectations regarding the knowledge, skills, and resources they will need to be successful as adults? Do children anticipate living as adults in the same kinds of communities and conditions in which they were raised?
3. How does residential relocation arising from internal migration or immigration affect children's developing sense of security and place (Adams & Kirova, 2006; Nette & Hayden, 2007)? How are stresses associated with migration associated with educational attainment and psychosocial well-being? How are the stresses and challenges of family relocation related to the reasons for that relocation?

The natural strategy for assessing children's constructions of their life experience is to interview them, but often interview methods must be supplemented by other approaches to be useful with children. The neighborhood-walk strategy, pioneered by Bryant (1985), uses a shared stroll around the neighborhood as the structure for an interview about a child's everyday experiences, with familiar locations and landmarks serving as the basis for inquiries about events of significance to the child. The neighborhood walk can also be the basis for inquiries about broader influences in society and the economy that affect life at home and in the community. Time-use studies can also be a valuable supplement to interviews, with the interview scaffolded around the child's (or a parent's) previously collected account of the activities, events, and partners that characterized the child's daily activities for a week. This strategy can provide the basis for inquiries about the child's activities, exposure to various media, relationships with significant adults, participation in community activities (e.g., civic, educational, recreational, employment, religious), informal peer networks, awareness of broader national events, and related issues. Photographs and pictures, hypothetical stories, and actual news accounts can also be enlisted into child interviews to elicit the child's awareness of, and responses to, local and national events associated with global change. There are also alternatives to interview procedures. For young children, hypothetical semiprojective doll-play stories can be used for exploring many of these issues, and for youth, focus-group discussions, participant observation, and peer-report methods can be productive.

### CONCLUSION

Research on how changes in political, economic, and cultural conditions—especially in societies undergoing transition—alter the everyday lives of children can reveal the extent to which many features of psychosocial, intellectual, and emotional growth originate in the sociocultural-historical conditions in which children and youth are developing (Boyce et al., 1998). Periods of rapid social change make the outcome of the developmental transitions of childhood and youth less predictable. During such periods, the social processes traditionally supporting these transitions (e.g., educational preparation of children for citizenship) are altered by economic upheaval, political changes, technological advances, or other societal transformations. This means that the current era of globalization offers developmental scientists a unique opportunity to explore how development is shaped, and reshaped, by broader cultural currents. It is an opportunity well worth seizing.

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