The Adaptive Self

Personal Continuity and Intentional Self-Development
The Adaptive Self
To Jochen Brandtstädtter
The Adaptive Self
Personal Continuity and Intentional Self-Development

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Introduction
The Adaptive Self:
Personal Continuity and
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We partly are and we partly become who we want to be. Explaining this astonishing congruence between actual and ideal conceptions of ourselves and of our development is the underlying goal of an action perspective on psychology (Brandtstädter, 1984, 1998). For some decades now, theories of life-long development have been inspired by the idea that development can be understood as the result of intentional action. From this perspective, individuals are regarded as “producers of their development” (Lerner & Busch-Roßnagel, 1981). Investigation of the processes relating
to the selection of personal goals and their translation to personal action has advanced our understanding of the conditions that are necessary for successful development as well as the conditions that might interfere with the efficient pursuit of goals (Brandstätter & Lerner, 1999; Heckhausen & Dweck, 1998).

Focusing exclusively on the active part of intentional self-development, however, does not provide a comprehensive account of development across the life-span: Typically, personal life histories are interspersed with failures and undesirable life events that were not intended by the individual and cannot be undone by active or compensatory efforts (Filipp, 1995; Montada, Filipp, & Lerner, 1992). Integrating the role of unintended events and adversities in personal development into a coherent theoretical framework requires some kind of dialectical maneuver on the part of an action perspective on human development. To fully capture the interdependence between “is” and “ought” in human development, one has to acknowledge that not only do we become who we want to be, but also that we want to be who we are and have become. A central objective of Jochen Brandstätter’s variant of an action perspective on development has been to elucidate the processes and mechanisms that allow personal goals, aspirations, and evaluations to be adapted to a given developmental situation in this way (Brandstätter, 1989, 1998, 2001; Brandstätter & Greve, 1994; Brandstätter & Renner, 1990, 1992; Brandstätter & Rothermund, 2002a, b; Brandstätter, Rothermund, & Schmitz, 1998; Brandstätter, Wentura, & Greve, 1993; Brandstätter, Wentura & Rothermund, 1999).

The key terms describing the balance between being the producer of development and the product of contextual constraints are “adaptivity” and “the self.” Adaptivity is used to characterize individual adjustments to certain circumstances, problems, obstacles, or deficits that maintain or enhance the stability of (certain features of) the individual. The human mind is not only adapted to the challenges and demands of its environment, as Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby (1992) have convincingly argued from an evolutionary perspective, it is also adaptive – that is, able to adapt to individually occurring situations and experiences.

The self, or the complex system constituting this adaptive capacity, should not be understood as representing one central unit, but rather as a collection of very diverse processes, mechanisms, and structures. Clearly, then, the self serves several functions. First, it processes and integrates a huge amount of information that relates to the individual in one way or another (including moods, intuitions, and other internal states). Second, the outcome of these processes – the individual self-concept – forms the basis for behavior, in particular intentional actions (Brandstätter, 1998, 1999; Lerner, Theokas, & Jelicic, this volume). In order to serve this function, the various forms of information processing have to be sufficiently realistic (including knowledge of the individual’s own capacities and limitations) and, at the same time, sufficiently stabilizing, because one precondition for long-term planning is a knowledge base that extends into the future. Moreover, the self has to enable the individual to set his or her own goals, since any action needs direction and thus presupposes decisions.
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However, the self is not only the producer of individual action and hence of developmental processes (Brandtstädter, 1998). At the same time, it is the product of development. After the emergence of its basic features, processes, and structures during the first years (which is not the focus of the present book; see, e.g., Harter, 1998), it must constantly adapt to changing circumstances and conditions (situational demands, varying environments and social partners, but also changing internal conditions, e.g., decline of sensory or cognitive capacities). Thus, the self is both the producer and the product of development (Brandtstädter & Lerner, 1999).

Moreover, inasmuch as some plans and actions are not only relevant for, but even intentionally directed towards the person’s own development, the self is the “co-producer” (Featherman & Lerner, 1985) of individual development in the narrower sense of this term. Everybody has plans, sometimes even complete scripts for their own development. Of course, more often than not, these plans are not fully fulfilled and may even fail completely, but the self reacts to obstacles and failures with new plans and scripts, sometimes with contingency plans prepared in advance. One central aim of these developmental plans and identity projects is personal continuity and stability. This continuity has to be achieved by means of adaptations, or changes, but even these changes serve the goal of continuity (Ryff, Singer, Love, & Essex, 1998). It is clear that we not only have a strong desire, but an existential need for a sense of identity, of being and staying the same person that we were yesterday and earlier on in life. Moreover, we need to be confident of remaining the same person tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. Adaptation in and to a permanently changing world requires changes in order to prevent more aversive changes. Thus, intentional self-development (Brandtstädter, 1999) means producing the conditions of one’s own future – partly intentionally, partly as the result of circumstances – to make sure that it is possible to act and react, but, at the same time, to remain ourselves despite the many changes and adaptations necessary.

However, if “the self” is not a single information processing device or unit, but rather a very complex and dynamic system of interacting structures and processes (Markus & Wurf, 1987), it is far from clear how the notion of “identity,” of staying the same person throughout our lives can be preserved despite the many changes we experience within and around us. The present collection of papers attempts to find answers to this question. What constitutes and stabilizes personal continuity and thus identity? How can a sense of continuity be preserved while acknowledging the necessity of changes? How can the complex interplay of emotional, motivational, and cognitive processes be understood? How can defending identity and personal stability be reconciled with the need to be sufficiently realistic, even with respect to one’s own losses and declines? How is it possible to analyze the interplay between producing one’s own development and being produced by one’s own development? Is intentional self-development, that is development of the self and through the self, a mere metaphor, a façon de parler, or is it a key to understanding what development in general means and how it works?

The notion of the adaptive self discussed in this book brings together and connects theoretical and empirical arguments from three perspectives. First, and most
important, from a developmental psychological perspective it attempts to provide a framework that integrates an action-theoretical perspective on intentional self-development with a life-span perspective on the development of the self. The central purpose of the book is to advance our understanding of what constitutes and stabilizes personal continuity and thus identity across life-span development. Its main thesis is that personal continuity is secured by a combination of active attempts at regulating one’s development on the one hand and flexible adjustment of the self to unalterable changes in one’s social and physical environment and in one’s attributes (e.g., competencies, physical fitness, health, cognitive abilities, etc.) on the other.

Second, this perspective is combined with attempts to investigate individual processes and resources in coping with losses and threats and, in particular, life crises and turning points. Few attempts have yet been made to investigate individual coping processes from a developmental perspective beyond taking the developmental relevance of the coping task into account. Our main thesis here is that developmental processes can be seen as both the driving force behind individual adaptations to developmentally relevant tasks and threats, and the product of these adaptations.

Third, an explanation of the underlying processes that constitute and regulate adaptational change and personal development requires the integration of different theoretical and methodological approaches. Self-views and self-conceptions have to be taken into account in combination with cognitive and information-processing approaches in order to explain micro-processes of self-perception and self-understanding. As a consequence, various methodological approaches, such as cross-sectional, longitudinal, sequential, and experimental designs, as well as various methods of assessment, such as questionnaire studies, experiments, and interview studies have to be combined to understand the adaptive processes of self-development.

The present volume is divided into four parts. The first section (“Adaptation and plasticity: Perspectives on self-development and development of the self”) comprises four chapters investigating self-development from a general perspective. Ines Schindler and Ursula M. Staudinger discuss the dynamics and the interplay between the mechanics and pragmatics of life. This theoretical framework of a life-span perspective on human development is complemented by the developmental systems perspective presented by Richard M. Lerner, Christina Theokas, and Helena Jelicic. Applied to the sample case of juvenile development, their approach sets the stage for an actional perspective on development: self-development means that individuals are co-producers of their development. Werner Greve adds the reverse perspective to this picture: self-development also means development of the self – one central question here is how far this self-development can be seen as intentional. Finally, Alexander von Eye completes this general perspective by discussing methodological questions relating to an action perspective on development, which must take into account not only statistical, but also logical forms of prediction.

The second section (“Action perspectives on development: Control of development and development of control”) focuses on a crucial theme of action perspectives on development: control. The roots of the psychological concept of control beliefs are discussed by Günther Krampen. Its origins in Julian Rotter’s social learning theory
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and application to both developmental psychology and personality psychology clearly demonstrate that an action perspective (on human development) can – and perhaps must – be integrated into a personality frame of reference, thus treading a path already prepared by Ines Schindler’s and Ursula M. Staudinger’s discussion of personality development and Werner Greve’s claim of the convergence of self development and personality. All three approaches converge in that they contribute to the emerging picture of personal continuity as a product of intentional self-development. Michael Poulin, Claudia Maria Haase, and Jutta Heckhausen add a further perspective by discussing the model of primary and secondary control of development in contrast to – or in comparison with – the two-process model proposed by Brandtstädter (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002b). In their view, primary and secondary control processes on the one hand and accommodative and assimilative self-regulations on the other (Brandtstädter, 1998) are, in many respects, overlapping constructs. A control perspective on human development and well-being is applied to a central problem of self-regulation in the next chapter. Aleksandra Luszczynska and Ralf Schwarzer discuss the role of self-efficacy in health self-regulation. This indicates that control and efficacy are essential resources not only for the regulation of development, but also more directly for individual quality of life.

The third section (“Self-regulation and development: Adaptive processes”) takes a closer look at the processes that secure the interplay of personal continuity and life-long adaptation. Martin Pinquart, Rainer K. Silbereisen, and Margit Wiesner present results indicating that adolescents not only reduce, but also actively produce discrepancies between developmental states and goals, suggesting that intentional self-development may not be restricted to the reduction of is/ought differences. In a similar vein, Helene Fung, Cara Rice, and Laura L. Carstensen discuss proactive motivational changes in later adulthood and contrast them with reactive changes in personal goals. Alexandra M. Freund and Natalie C. Ebner focus on a developmental shift with respect to what might be called the meta-goal of intentional self-development. The need – and necessity – to compensate for losses increases with age, thus increasingly triggering intraindividual processes that help individuals to reach this goal. Their discussion brings together the theory of selection, optimization, and compensation (SOC; Baltes & Baltes, 1990) with Brandtstädter’s two-process model (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002b), and advances the discussion begun in the first partition of the book, particularly in Ines Schindler’s and Ursula M. Staudinger’s contribution. The chapter by Dirk Wentura takes a look beyond the personal stance adopted in the previous chapters. He takes a social-cognitive perspective on the dynamics behind – or within – the adaptive processes of the two-process model as well as the SOC model. Empirical and theoretical arguments suggest that the personal stance toward developmental self-regulation has to be complemented (and perhaps substituted in part) by a sub-personal approach investigating these processes of self-development from a cognitive point of view. In a final chapter, Klaus Rothermund reviews evidence on the implications of age stereotypes for the self-concepts and well-being of elderly people. Although age stereotypes generally present a threat
to well-being and successful development in old age, there is evidence for protective mechanisms that shield the aging self against this negative influence.

According to Brandstädter (1998, in press), an action-theoretical approach to human development has to take into account that development always occurs in social and cultural contexts. Thus, the fourth section of this volume (“Development in context: Interactional perspectives on development”) focuses on an interactional perspective on development that is necessary to understand the regulative processes governing human development. The first two chapters in this section focus on interactions within partnerships. Eva Wunderer and Klaus A. Schneewind discuss the role of implicit relationship theories and their contribution to marital well-being. Georg Felser presents results that shed light on the interplay between self-views and partner views and the implications of this complex interaction for life and marital satisfaction. Clemens Tesch-Römer broadens the perspective again: Do adaptive mechanisms differ between cultures? He presents data from a cross-cultural study that open up the discussion of whether processes of accommodation are universal or culture-specific. In either case, one consequence of an actional and interactional approach to self-development is the emergence of an interventional perspective on development that aims at optimizing processes of self-development. Following this line of reasoning, Horst Gräser presents a framework for developmental counseling. In the final chapter, Jürgen Straub, Barbara Zielke, and Hans Werbik extend the picture by bringing together two lines of argument that were touched upon in several of the previous chapters. First, the processes of individual identity production are complemented by the concept of narrative identity, that is, the construction of a coherent personal identity by narrative reconstruction of one’s biography. Second, the general notion of intentional self-development, the discussion of developmental and personal control, the balance between reactive and proactive motivational changes, the shift from primary to secondary control, from promoting gains to offsetting losses, and finally the subpersonal cognitive processes that “produce” these changes all inevitably touch on the central question of individual autonomy. Though the topic of personal autonomy is more controversial today than ever before, any action-theoretical approach to human development must present an answer to this fundamental question.

We partly are and we partly become who we want to be. Even if it were acceptable, this phrase has many and diverse connotations. The present volume discusses the adaptive processes and the dynamic interplay between the pursuit of personal (developmental) goals and the (developmental) adjustment of these goals to constraints, losses, or alterations in action and developmental resources from a broad range of perspectives (Brandstädter, 1998; Brandstädter & Rothermund, 2002b). Brandstädter uses the terms assimilation and accommodation to describe the fundamental processes of pursuing and adjusting one’s goals. Although not all contributors to this volume share this terminology, they all essentially agree that this kind of dual-process perspective represents a useful and heuristically fruitful theoretical framework. We differ only in minor or major details as to where this starting point leads.