Social change, cultural evolution, and human development
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Social change has accelerated globally. Greenfield's interdisciplinary and multilevel theory of social change and human development provides a unified framework for exploring implications of these changes for cultural values, learning environments/socialization processes, and human development/behavior. Data from societies where social change has occurred in place (US, China, and Mexico) and a community where it has occurred through international migration (Mexican immigrants in the US) elucidate these implications. Globally dominant sociodemographic trends are: rural to urban, agriculture to commerce, isolation to interconnectedness, less to more education, less to more technology, lesser to greater wealth, and larger to smaller families/households. These trends lead to both cultural losses (e.g., interdependence/collectivism, respect, tradition, contextualized thinking) and cultural gains (e.g., independence/ individualism, equality, innovation, abstraction).

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Social change has accelerated in the world. Ordinary people are aware of these changes and have folk theories concerning the behavioral ramifications of social change [1•,2]. Greenfield's theory of social change, cultural evolution, and human development provides a unified framework for exploring the cultural and psychological implications of these changes, complementing folk theories with other kinds of psychological evidence [3••,4]. This is a multilevel and interdisciplinary theory incorporating sociological variables at the top level (with roots in Tönnies [5]), cultural variables at the next level down, and more traditional psychological variables at the next two levels (Figure 1).

According to this theory, as the world becomes more urban, formally educated, commercial, richer, interconnected, and technological, with smaller families and households (the dominant direction of social change in our globalizing world) cultural values, learning environments (i.e., socialization processes) and human development/behavior shift in predictable ways to adapt to the new conditions (e.g., [6•] and Figure 2).

On the cultural level, these sociodemographic changes move values from more collectivistic (family-centered, community-centered, or nation-centered) to more individualistic (e.g., [7,8,9•,10]). Adapting to new conditions, cultural values for social relationships shift from hierarchical to egalitarian gender relations, from ascribed to chosen gender roles, and from giving to others to getting for oneself; the importance of materialism and fame rises [11]. Values adaptive in agricultural communities, such as obedience and age-graded authority, decline in importance, as child-centeredness increases [12•–15]. Preferred thinking processes shift from tradition to innovation, from contextualized cognition to abstraction [15,16•]. In meta-cognition, values shift from one correct perspective to multiple perspectives [14,17•] (Figure 2).

At the next level down, value changes are reflected in new socialization practices and learning environments that foster the behavioral expression of these values: a movement from socially guided learning to independent learning [15,18]; from more bodily contact between mothers and infants to more physical separation [19]; from criticism as a way to bring others up to a social standard to praise as a way to foster self-confidence [20]; to support and warmth as important socialization practices (C Zhou, Yiu, Wu, Lin, & Greenfield, unpublished data) [21]; from expectations of family obligation to expectations of individual development [22]; from in-person social interaction to technologically mediated social interaction [9•] (Figure 2).

These changes in the learning environment in turn lead to new patterns of behavioral development, in other words: altered psychologies. In the social domain, adaptive behavior goes from obedient to independent [15] (C Zhou, Yiu, Wu, Lin, & Greenfield, unpublished data), from respectful to self-expressive and curious (C Zhou, Yiu, Wu, Lin, & Greenfield, unpublished data) [23]. In the cognitive domain, processes go from detail-oriented to abstract, from tradition-based to novel [15,16•] (Figure 2). The bottom rectangle of Figure 2 summarizes other developmental and behavioral shifts that will be discussed later as part of the four case studies.

A novel feature of the theory (illustrated later in the Maya Mexican case), is that each sociodemographic factor is equipotential. Whatever factor or factors is/are changing
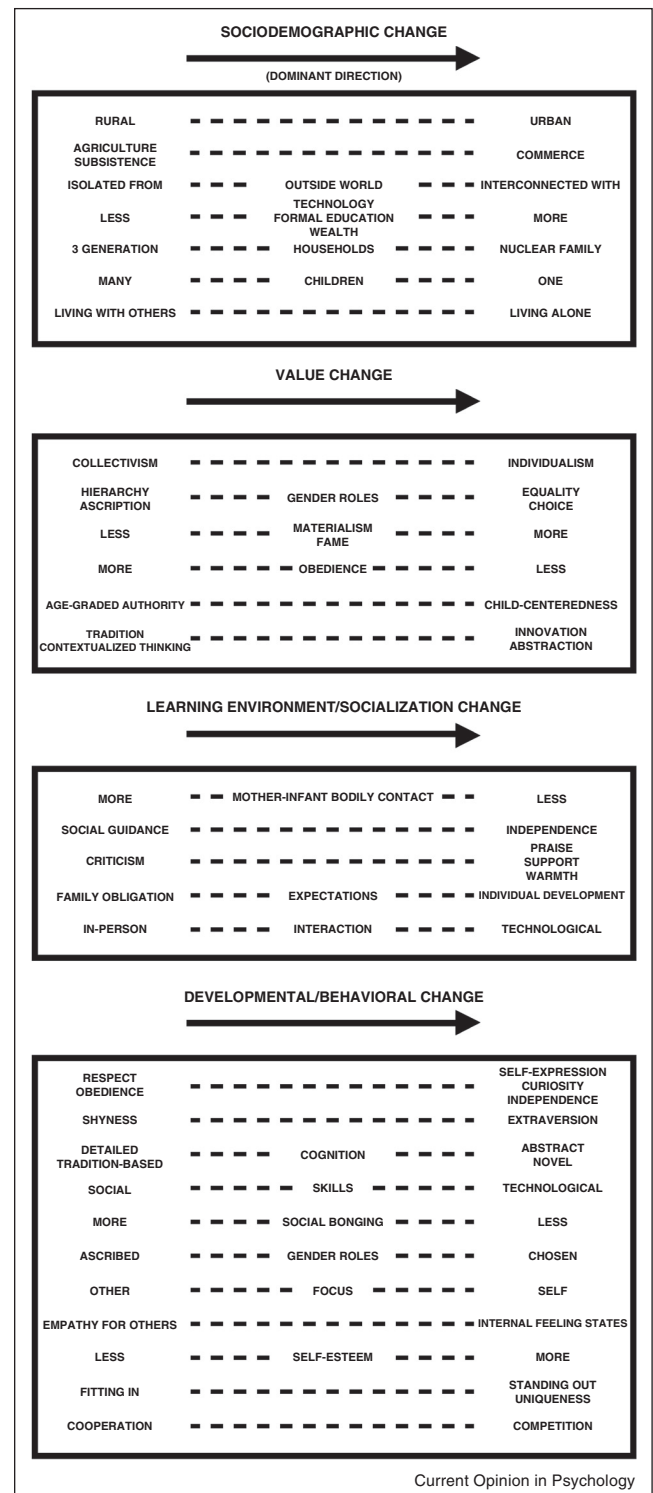
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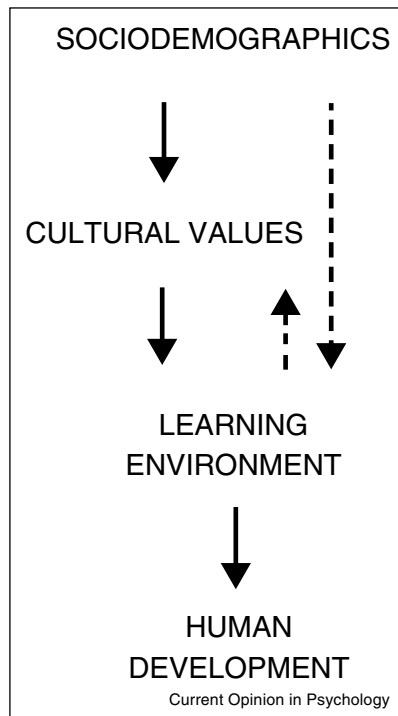
A multilevel model linking sociological, cultural, environmental, and behavioral variables. Solid arrows denote the main causal pathway, with dashed arrows indicating an alternative causal pathway.

Figure 2

Model of social change, cultural evolution, and human development. Relationships for which there is empirical evidence, described in the text, have been selected for inclusion. While the horizontal arrows represent the dominant direction of social change in the world, sociodemographic change can go in the opposite direction [52•]. In that case all the horizontal arrows would be reversed.

most rapidly will drive cultural and psychological change in a particular time or place.

In order to show the interrelation of multiple levels (depicted by the vertical arrows in Figure 1), four case studies will be presented. Their variety illustrates an important fact: social change is pervasive in the world; it is not limited to so-called developing countries. Nor is it limited to social change that occurs in one's place of birth: around the world, people move from poorer to wealthier societies, from rural to urban environments, from places with little opportunity for formal education to places with more, from low tech environments to high-tech environments. Hence the theory can apply to migration situations. Three of the four case studies relate to social change in place: The United States, China, and the Maya of Chiapas. One relates to migration: Latino immigration from Mexico and Central America to the United States.

But societies and migrant populations also have their discrepancies, dialectics, and disconnects in the process of adapting to social change — for example, a discrepancy between behavior and values, with shifting values sometimes leading corresponding shifts in the learning environment, and altered learning environments sometimes leading corresponding shifts in values [24•,25]. For in-