

# CONTEMPORARY THEORIES OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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# **A (Very) Brief Overview of Approaches to Theories of Human Development from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

- ▶ Metatheories of human development: Mechanistic, Organismic, Relational Developmental (Dynamic) Systems
  - Mechanistic theories: Nature or Nurture reductionism
  - Organismic theories: Stages and predetermined versus probabilistic epigenesis
  - Relational Developmental Systems (RDS)-based theories

# Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) Metatheory

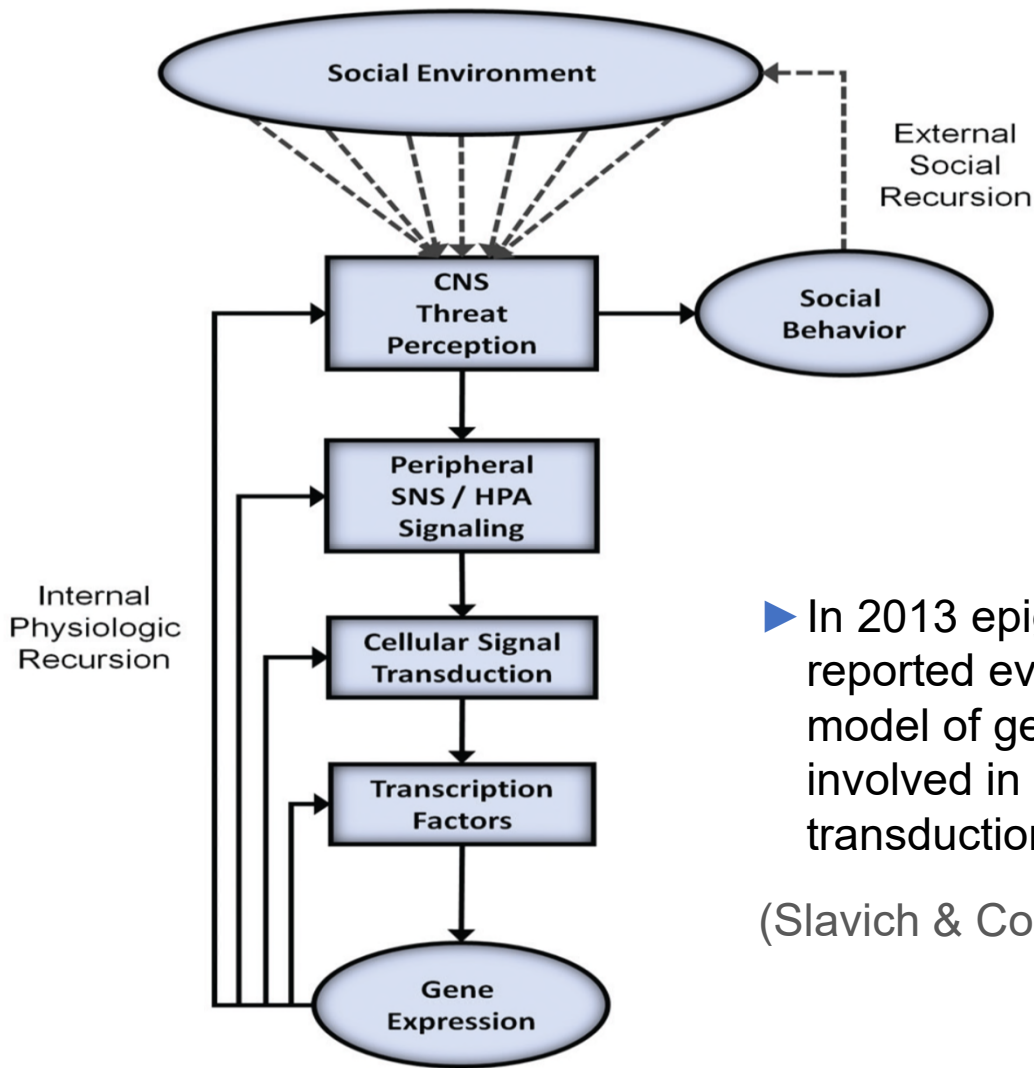
- ▶ RDS is a metatheory (a theory of how theories should be constructed in developmental science).
- ▶ RDS holds that all levels of organization within the ecology of human development, from biology/physiology through culture, the physical ecology, and history (temporality), are integrated.
- ▶ In RDS-based theories (models), development across life involves mutually influential individual  $\Leftrightarrow$  context relations (see Lerner, 2018, *Concepts and theories of human development*, 4th ed., published by Routledge, for further discussion of the RDS metatheory).

# Relational Development Systems-Based Theories

- ▶ The integration of levels of organization, from biology/physiology through culture, the physical ecology, and history (temporality)
- ▶ Developmental regulation across life involves mutually influential individual ↔ context relations
- ▶ Integrated actions, individual ↔ context relations, are the basic unit of analysis within human development
- ▶ Temporality and relative plasticity in human development
- ▶ Optimism, the application of developmental science, and the promotion of positive human development: The potential for furthering social justice

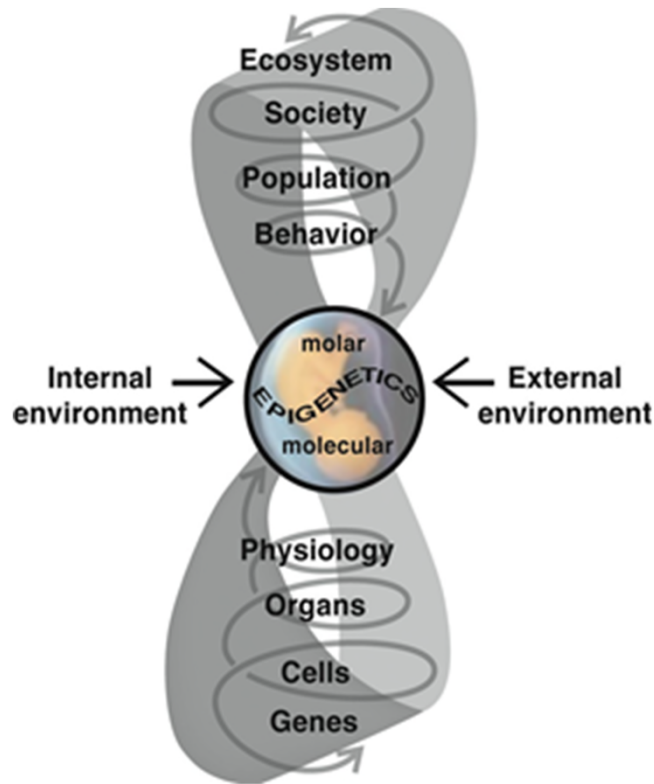
# Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) Metatheory

- ▶ In contemporary developmental science, RDS-based theories are at the cutting-edge of developmental science research.
- ▶ The following slides present several illustrations of such models in developmental science.
- ▶ These examples are drawn from evolutionary biology, molecular genetics (specifically, epigenetics), comparative psychology, sociology, and human development.



- In 2013 epigenetics researchers reported evidence for an RDS-based model of gene ⇔ context relations involved in human social signal transduction.

(Slavich & Cole, 2013, p. 336)

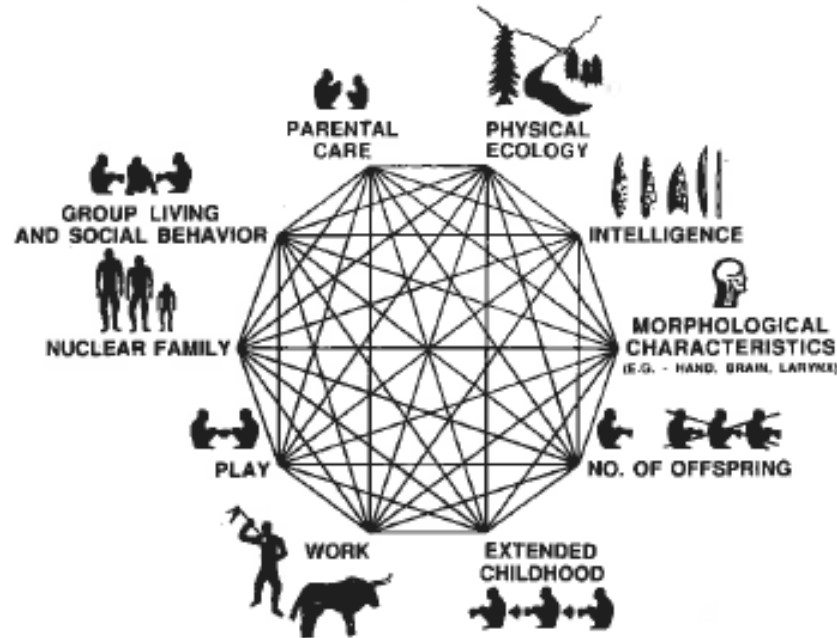


**MOLAR**  
*epiphenotype*



**MOLECULAR**  
*epigenotype*

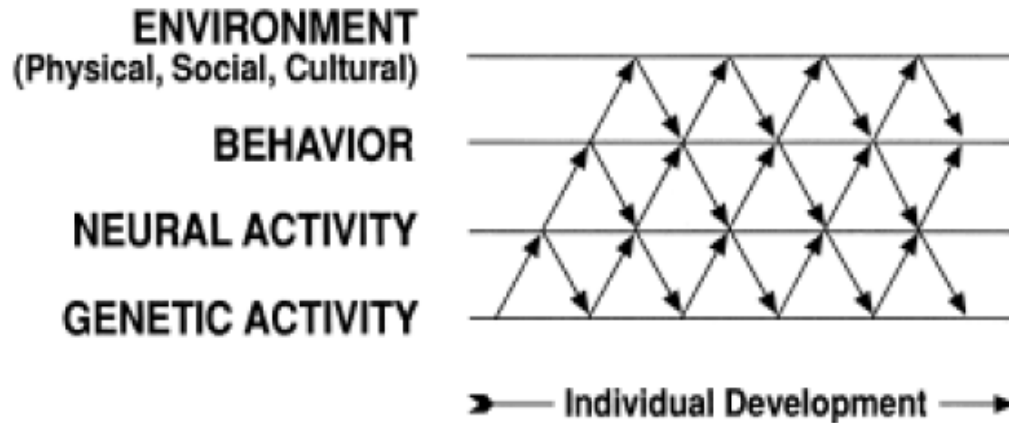
- Epigenetics researcher David Crews presents an RDS-based model of the molecular epigenotype ⇔ molar epiphenotype relations involved in individual ⇔ context relations.



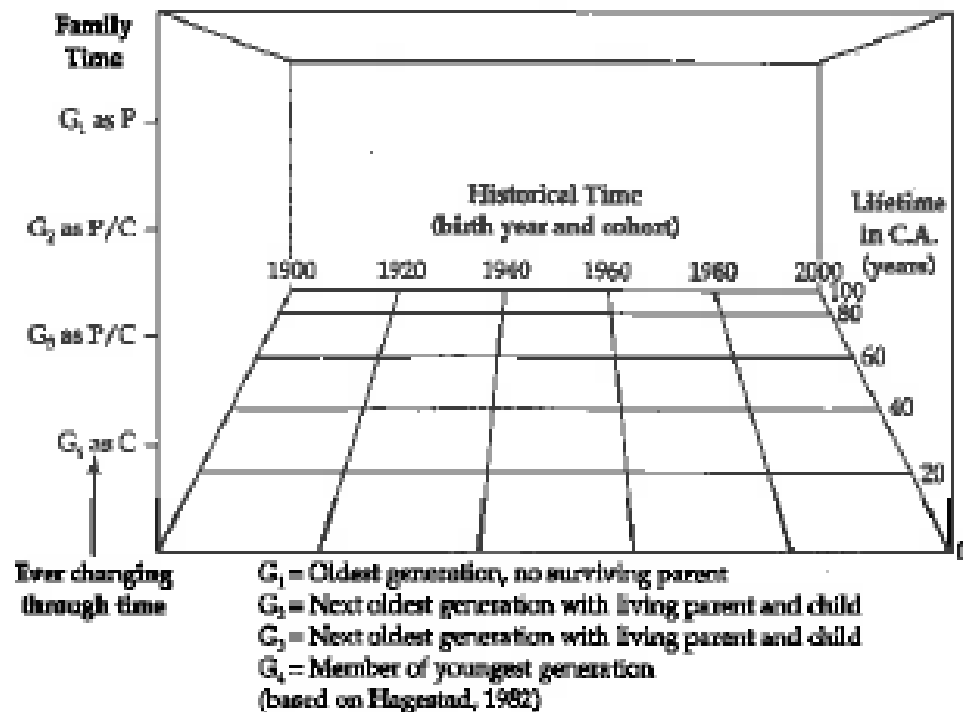
- Derived from Johanson and Edey (1981), this figure provides an RDS model of human evolution. It provides a view of the phylogenetic (evolutionary) history of the components of individual ↔ context relations that provided a basis for the evolution of the suite of characteristics that define homo sapiens. The RDS-based ideas presented in the model are analogous to the ideas associated with the work of the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould (e.g., 1977).



## BIDIRECTIONAL INFLUENCES



- ▶ Comparative psychologist Gilbert Gottlieb, writing from the mid-1990s through the middle of the first decade of the 21st century proposed what he termed a developmental systems view of the bidirectional relations involved in individual development within an RDS-based conception.

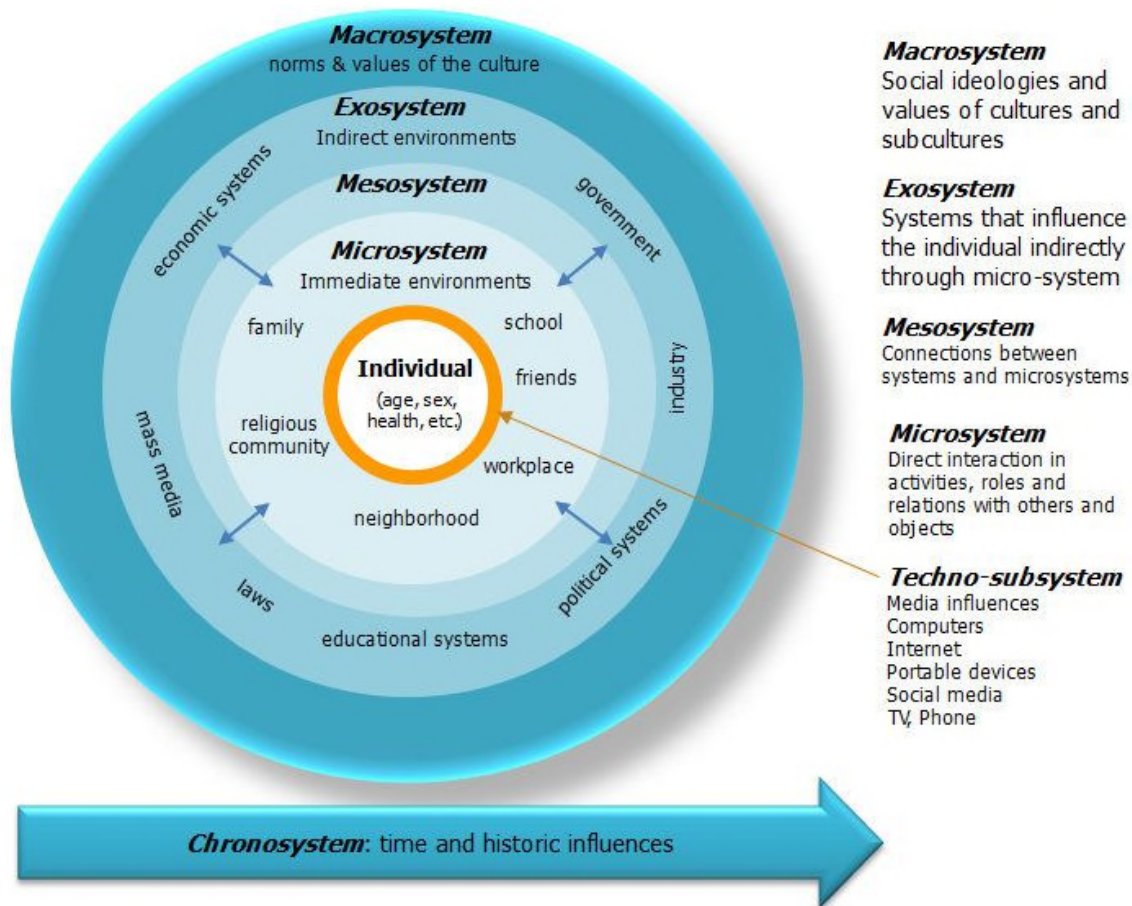


**FIGURE 9.3**  
 Life-course trajectories in three-dimensional space: life, family, and historical time.

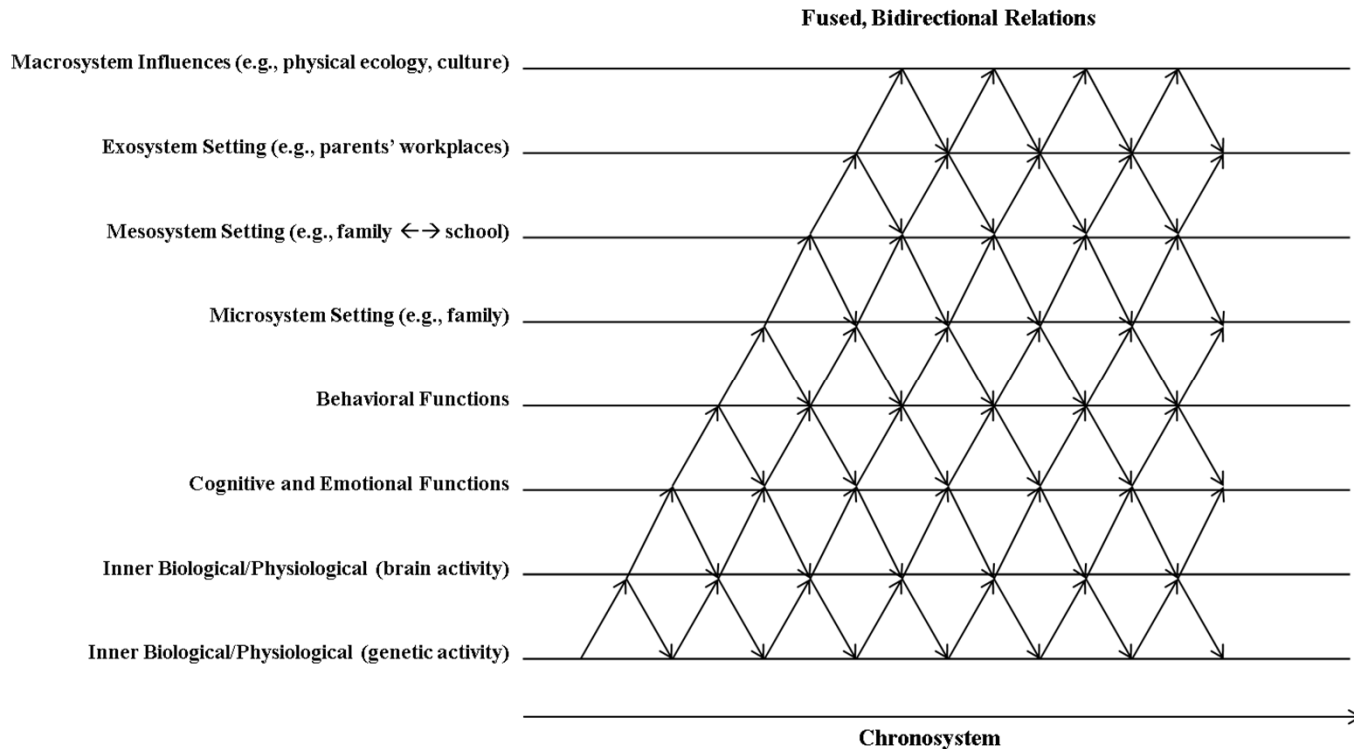
Source: Elder (1998, p. 949).

- ▶ Writing in 1998, Glen H. Elder, Jr. presented a life-course theory that embraced RDS thinking and included the idea that time had a different meaning at different levels of the relational developmental system (individual life time, family time, and historical time). Elder's conception influenced the bioecological model of Urie Bronfenbrenner.

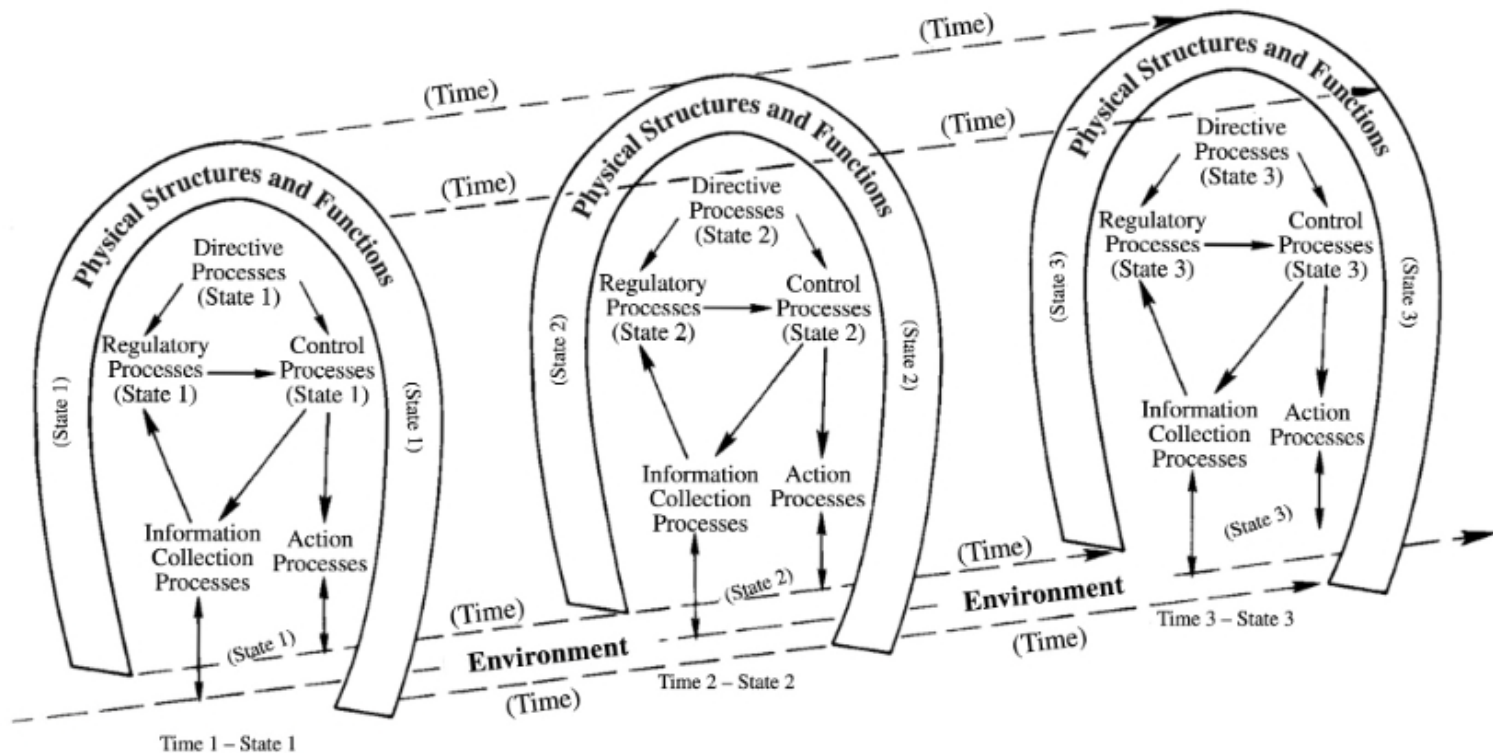
## Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development



- ▶ This figure presents the well-known (perhaps the best known) instance of an RDS-based model for human development across the life span: Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. The model evolved across the period of 1979-2005 (when Urie passed away). The chronosystem portion of the model was influenced by Urie's discussions with sociologist Glen H. Elder, Jr. (the next slide presents a different rendition of the Bronfenbrenner model).

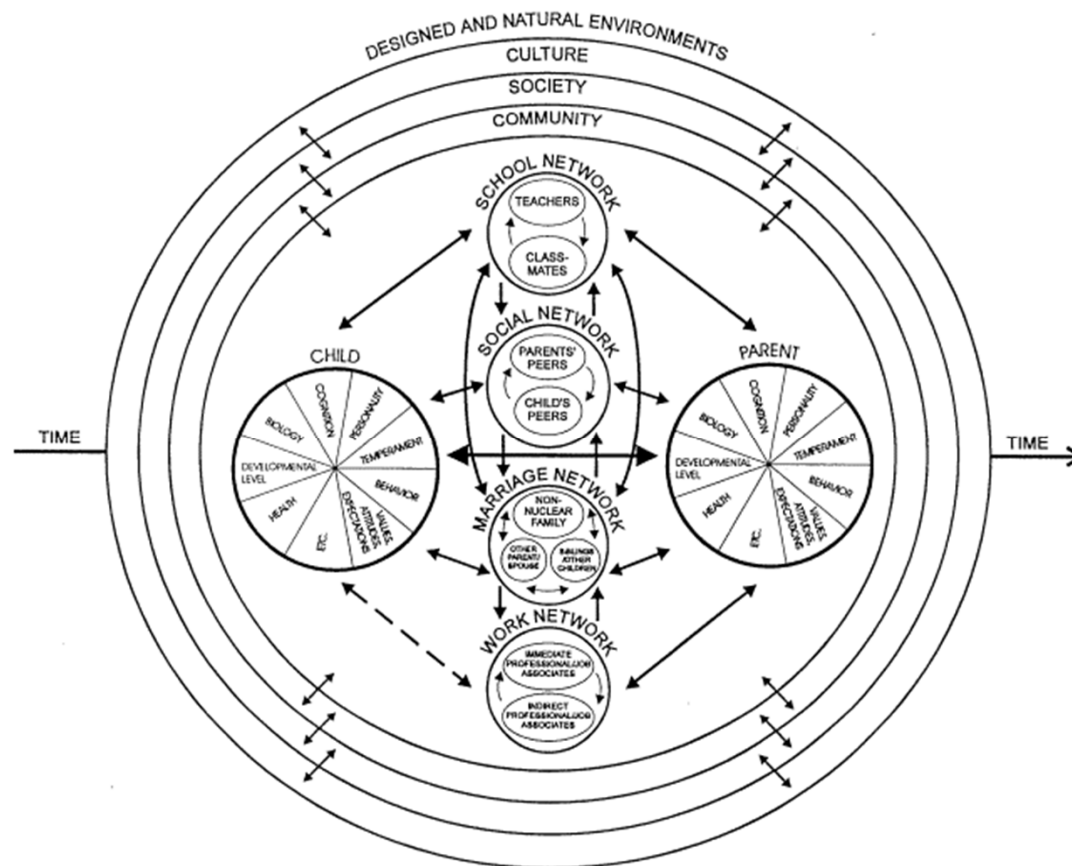


- From Lerner, Johnson, & Buckingham (2015): **A version of the Bronfenbrenner bioecological model.** An elaborated version of Gottlieb's (e.g., 1992, 1997, 1998) probabilistic epigenetic conception of integrated levels of organization (see Slide 4) is used to depict the fused relations among the levels in the ecology of human development (only a subset of relations, involving adjacent levels, are illustrated).

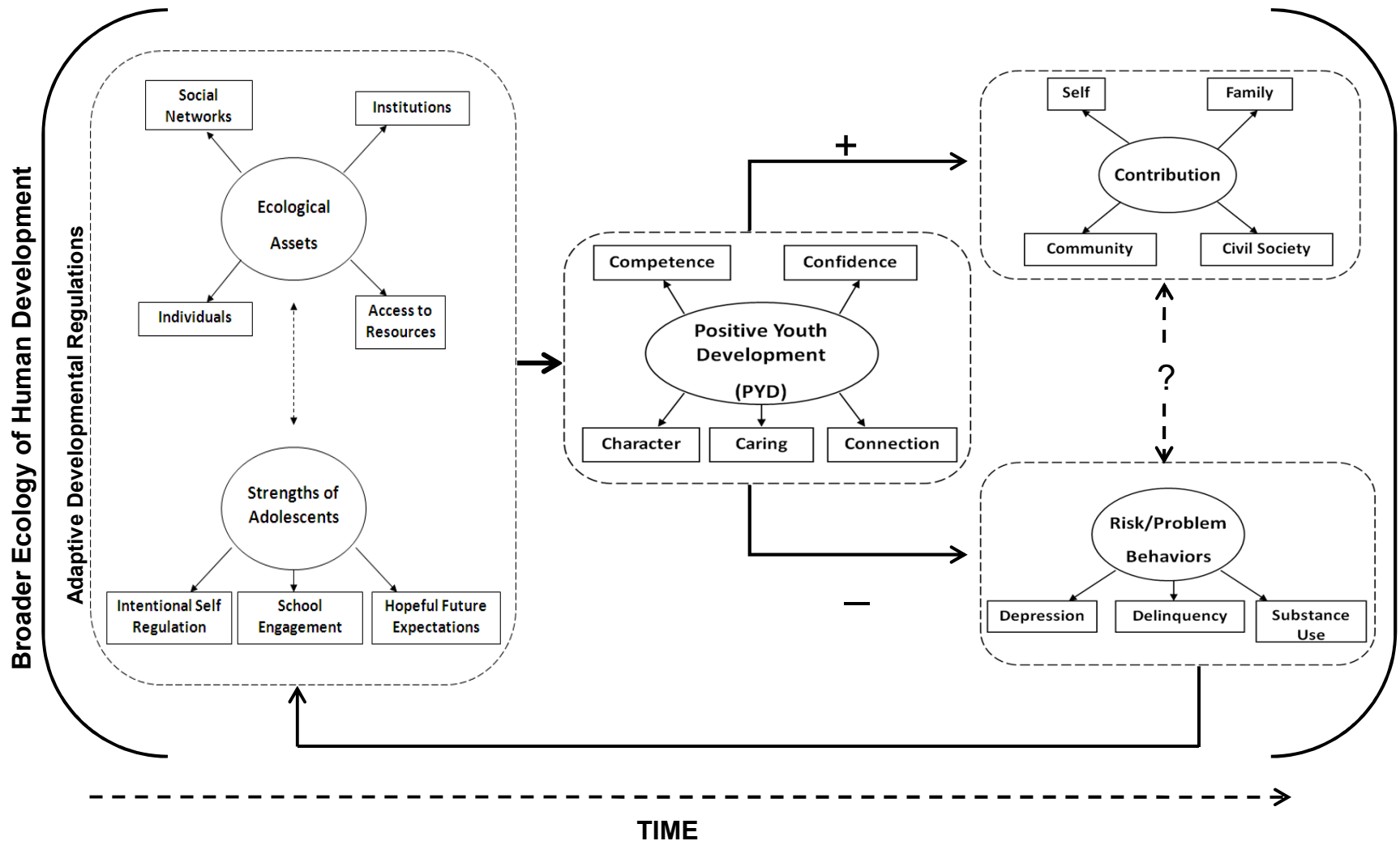


**Figure 6.5** Ford and Lerner's model of developmental change as a series of probabilistic states.

- Ford and Lerner (1992) presented an RDS-based model of individual ⇔ context relations across time, operationalized in the model as individual state ⇔ physical structures and functions.



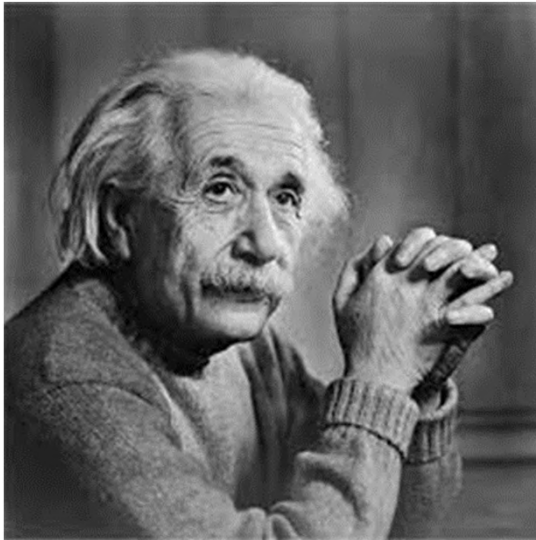
- R. M. Lerner, writing from the early 1990s through the mid-part of the first decade of the 21st century presented what he termed a developmental contextual model of the individual ⇔ context relations within the relational developmental system. The influences of Bronfenbrenner and of Elder are clearly evident in this model.



- In the first decade of the 21st century, R. M. Lerner and J. V. Lerner proposed an RDS-based model of the individual ⇌ context relations involved in positive youth (adolescent) development.



# The Key Idea In RDS-Based Theories of Human Development



*“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.”*

*Albert Einstein*

- ▶ The individual and the context must be aligned in order to demonstrate a child’s developmental range and potential for thriving.
- ▶ There must be aligned individual ⇔ context relations for an individual to thrive.



# **Marc Bornstein's Specificity Principle:**

## **Development Involves Relations Between a Specific Individual Occurring at a Specific Time and in a Specific Place**

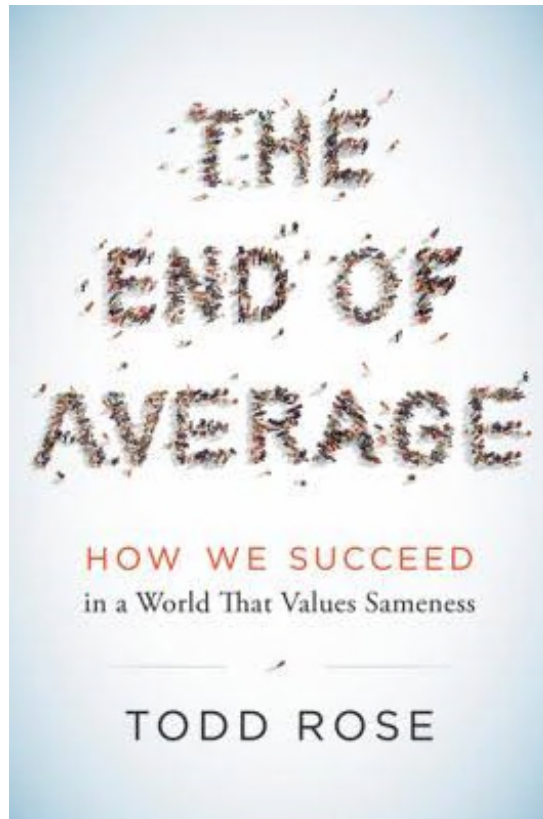
- ▶ The process of development involves mutually influential (dynamic) relations between an individual and his/her context: Individual  $\Leftrightarrow$  Context Relations.
- ▶ The specificity principle emphasizes that specific contextual conditions, of specific people, occurring at specific times, shapes specific facets of development (e.g., physiological, psychological, sociocultural) through specific processes of individual  $\Leftrightarrow$  context coaction.
- ▶ The specificity principle emphasizes, then whole-child development AND the individuality of each child's development.



# A Prototypic Use of the Bornstein Specificity Principle to Frame a Multi-Part Question for Understanding Whole-Child Development

- ▶ What specific behaviors,
- ▶ Of what specific individual,
- ▶ In what specific place (context),
- ▶ Of what specific duration,
- ▶ In what specific community, society, and culture,
- ▶ At what specific time in the life span,
- ▶ And at what specific time in history
- ▶ Will result in what specific features of learning and development?

**IMPLICATIONS:** To study learning and development, research must begin with a focus on *changes within specific people, and not on relations among variables across people!*



# Three Concepts that Go Beyond an Exclusive Focus on Average

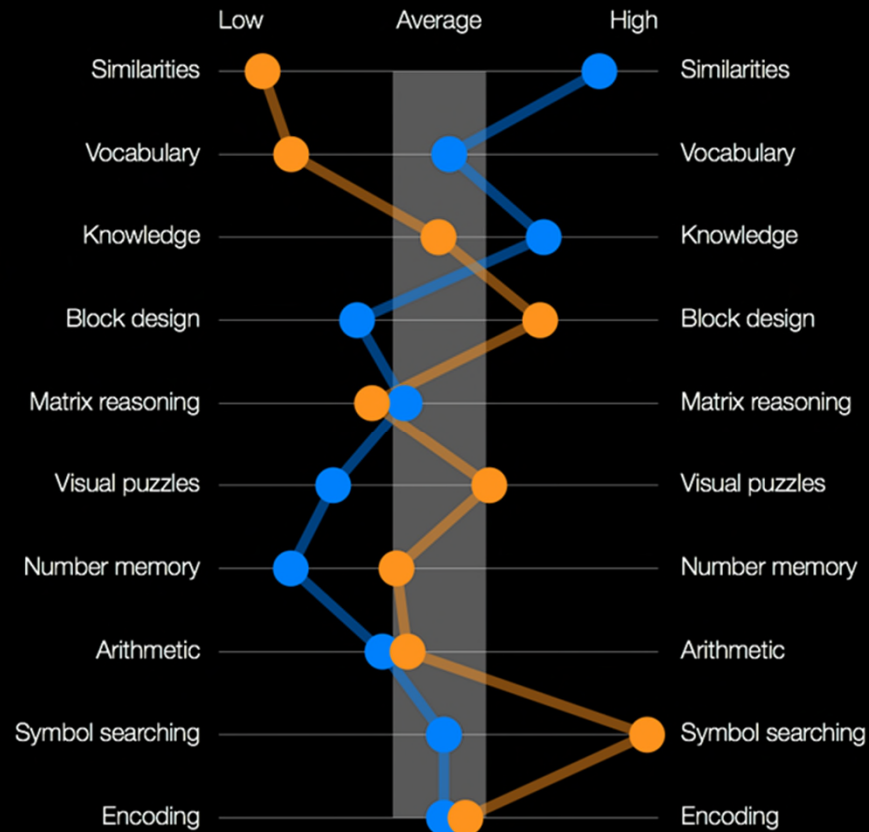
**1. Jaggedness**

**2. Context**

**3. Pathways**

## Three Concepts that Go Beyond an Exclusive Focus on Average

1. **Jaggedness**: At any point in time each person has his or her specific and unique constellation of attributes (e.g., academic, moral, civic, social, and leadership).



# Three Concepts that Go Beyond an Exclusive Focus on Average

**2. Context:** The attributes shown by an individual at any point in time are shaped by the specific context of development.

## Context

- ▶ Monozygotic rodents exposed to different in utero and post-natal experiences



Slavich & Cole (2013, p.332)



## Three Concepts that Go Beyond an Exclusive Focus on Average

3. **Pathways**: We all walk the road less traveled (every individual will have his/her own specific history of development across time and place).

# **Pathways:**

## **4-H Study of Positive Youth Development**

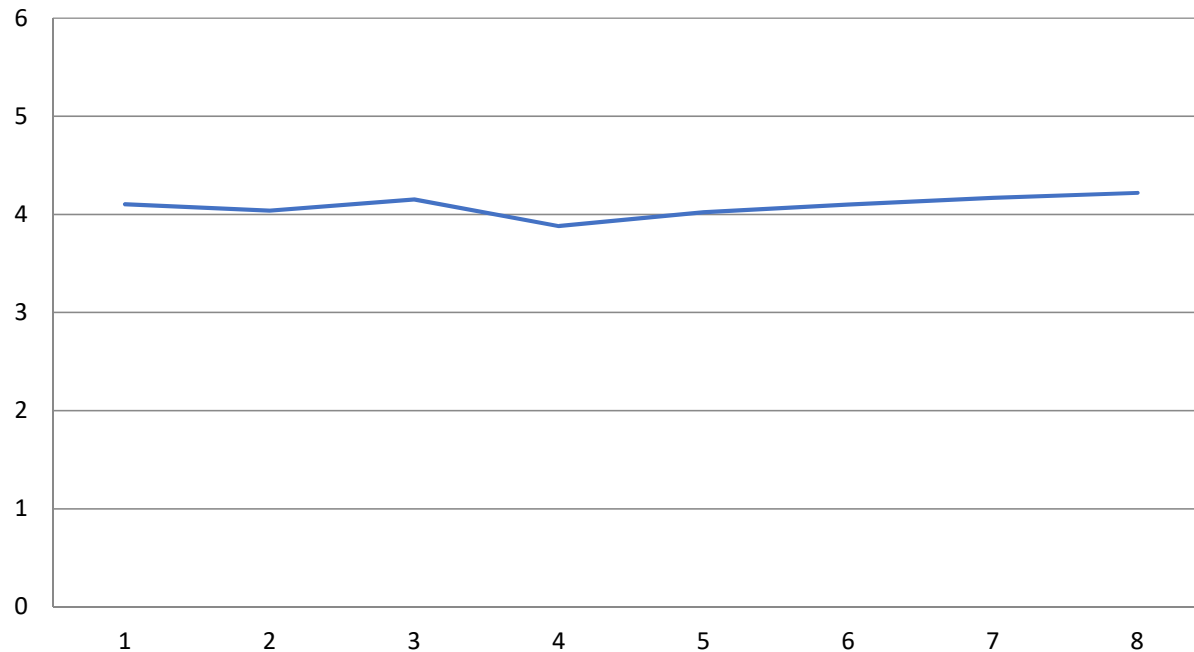
- ▶ 8 waves (Grades 5 to 12, respectively), 7087 participants
- ▶ Gender: 60.6% Female; 39.4% Male
- ▶ Race: 70.7% White; 10.2% Hispanic; 7.9% Black; 3.7% Multiethnic; 3.3% Other; 2.3% Native American; 2.1% Asian
- ▶ Mother's education: 33.6% 4-year degree or higher; 37.2% 2-year or technical degree; 20.5% High School; 8.6% less than High School
- ▶ Mean per capita income \$15,279.26

*Note that the longitudinal sample presented in these analyses includes all cases with at least 6 waves of data.*

# Goal Optimization Skills:

(e.g., strategic thinking, executive functioning, resource recruitment)

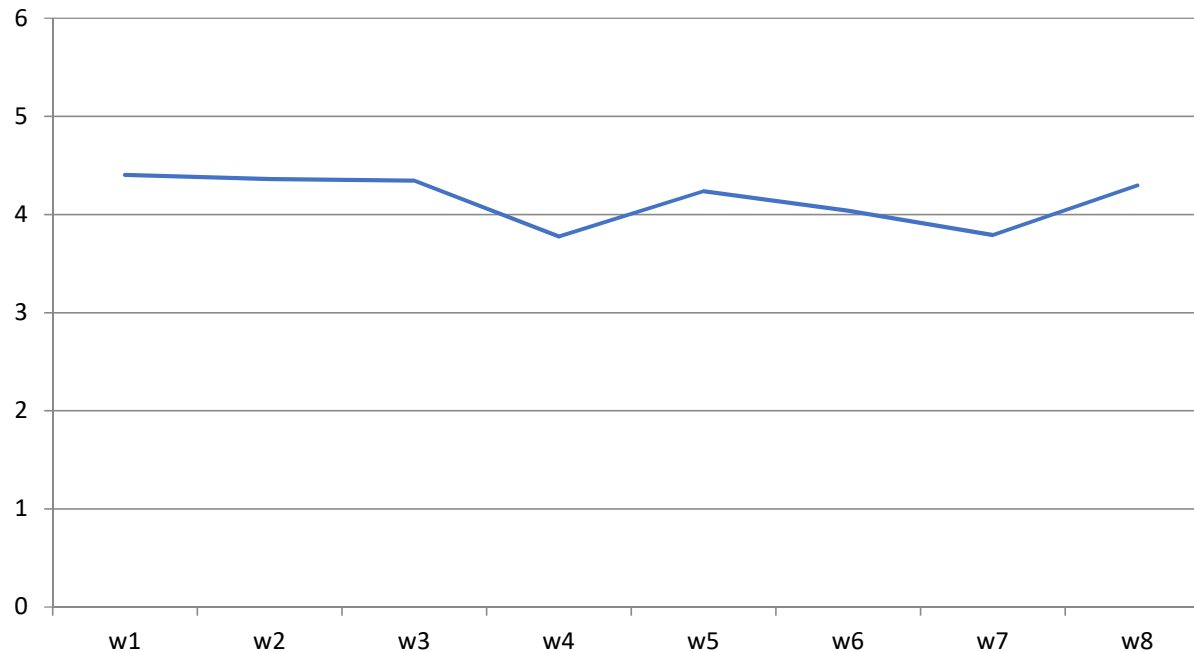
**Full Sample (N = 7,087)**



# Goal Optimization Skills:

(e.g., strategic thinking, executive functioning, resource recruitment)

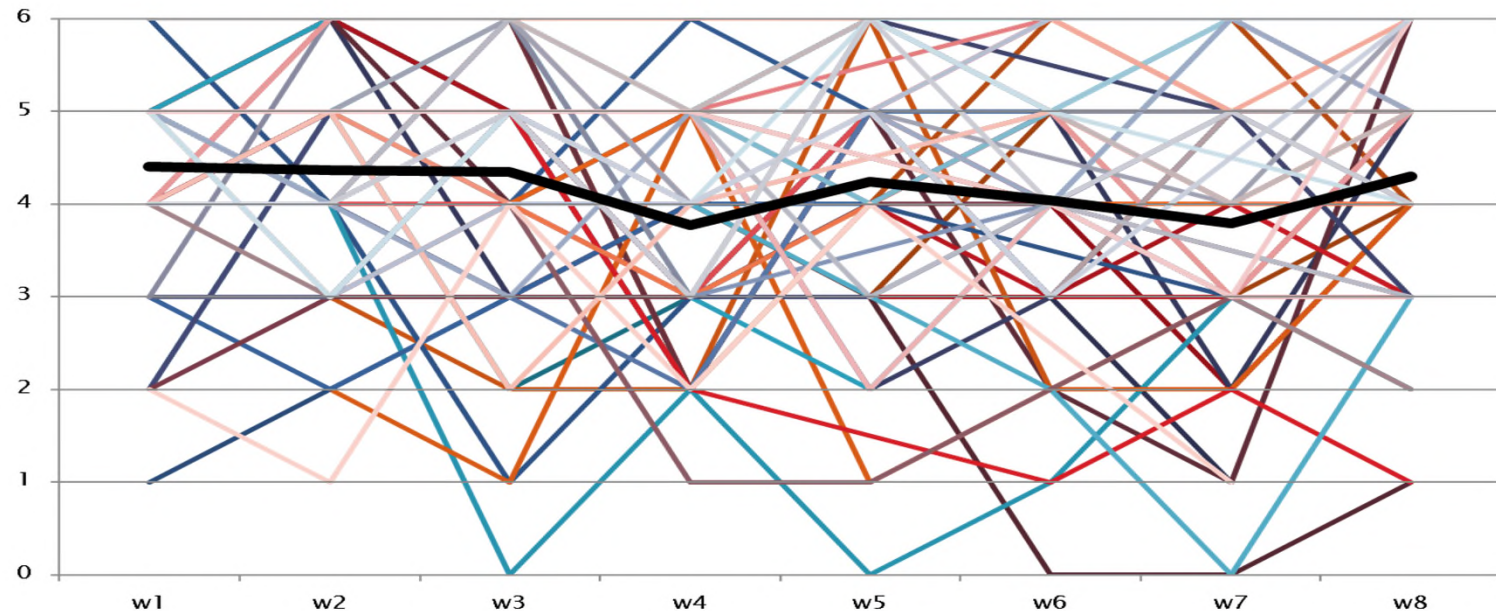
## Longitudinal Sample Average (N = 59)



# Goal Optimization Skills:

(e.g., strategic thinking, executive functioning, resource recruitment)

## Person-Specific Pathways for Longitudinal Sample (N = 59)



# Implications of RDS-Based Theories for Applications of Developmental Science

- ▶ Theoretically predicated changes in the developmental system need to be evaluated in regard to whether positive development can be equally promoted among individuals whose ecological characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic circumstances) lower the probability of thriving.
- ▶ Researchers need to identify ways to change the individual ⇔ context relation in order to enhance the probability that all individuals, no matter their individual characteristics or contextual circumstances, will thrive.
- ▶ Applications of developmental science need to create equivalent chances for all individuals to experience positive development.
- ▶ Such applications of developmental science are aimed at promoting social justice.

# **Social Justice as the Focal Lens for Applying Developmental Science**

- ▶ Social justice focuses also on social inequities, characterized as avoidable and unjust social structures and policies that limit access to resources based solely on group or individual characteristics such as race/ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, physical or developmental ability status, and/or immigration status, among others.
- ▶ Social justice focuses on the rights of all groups in a society to have fair access to, and a voice in, policies governing the distribution of resources essential to their physical and psychological well-being.
- ▶ Using developmental theory as a frame for applications promoting social justice will be the most significant lens through which the future contributions of developmental science will be judged.

**THANK YOU!**