INTRODUCTION

Psychologists have observed that American adolescents often have difficulty committing themselves to efforts either in school or in other activities (Erikson, 1963; Keniston, 1970). While Erikson and Keniston recognize that this lack of commitment arises due to psychological, interpersonal, cultural, economic, and social factors, psychologists usually focus on intrapsychic processes. For instance, a textbook identifies “identity disorder” as one source of low achievement in late adolescence, recommends psychotherapeutic techniques to address the internal disorder, and does not even consider the possible influence of external social context on these behaviors (Mandel & Marcus, 1988, p. 299). Another psychologist says that adolescents lack “career maturity,” which makes them unwilling to work hard in school for the sake of their future careers (Crites, 1976). Psychologists are not the only ones to make such inferences. In the 1980s, labor economists sometimes explained youths’ job turnover by saying that some youth are unstable and immature (Osterman, 1980). Practitioners often make such inferences. In interviews in the 1990s, we have heard high school teachers and counselors say that adolescents are “present oriented,” cannot defer gratification, and will not work hard in school for future benefits. One guidance counselor reported, “these kids cannot plan beyond next Saturday night’s date.” In many of these accounts, the problem is inside students, and it comes from the adolescent life stage. These interpretations rarely mention social context.
Lifespan theorists are divided about the influence of social context in the life course. Dannefer (1992) identified four ways that social context has been conceptualized in life course research.

1. **Functionally unimportant.** Some theorists have proposed models in which social context is largely irrelevant. For example, although Levinson et al. (1978) pay lip service to the important influence of social context, they describe stages and sequences of adult development that are universal across cultures and historical periods. They even assert that age timetables exist which do not vary across different contexts. As a result, context is in effect irrelevant and adult development stages are “not subject to environmental shaping except at the pathological extremes” (Dannefer, 1992, p. 86).

2. **Powerful, but random.** Other theorists suggest that social context has large influences, but its effects are random. For instance, Baltes contends that the life course is affected by non-normative influences, “determinants that, although significant in their effect on individual life histories, are not general. They do not occur for everyone nor do they necessarily occur in easily discernible and invariant sequences or patterns” (Baltes, 1983, p. 95). In this formulation, “non-normative influences include migration, career changes, unemployment, divorce, and ‘unexpected’ changes in health” (Dannefer, 1992, p. 87). When psychologists view individuals in a therapeutic session or in a university laboratory, the influence of context may seem random. Although psychologists may view these events as unexplained by their models, Dannefer (1992, p. 87) suggests that they are not “inexplicable in their origins when viewed from other perspectives, such as sociology or epidemiology.”

3. **Organized, but static.** Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides extensive discussion of contextual influences on development at the micro-, meso-, macro-, and exo-systems levels. He stresses the importance of looking at settings and environments, which may be damaging to the child under certain conditions. He emphasizes the interaction of levels, the ways that interpersonal supports affect individuals’ coping with new organizations. Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Magnusson and Allen (1983) have provided descriptive topologies of various aspects of social context, but they tend to miss the dynamic aspects, and they do not explain the process of change of direction or trend. Generalities can be inferred based on observations, but they have an ad hoc character, without suggesting an underlying mechanism. Prediction is possible based on prior observations of existing trends, but the behavioral consequences of policies that represent radical changes are not included in these analyses.

4. **Systematically organized and dynamic.** In this view, context is viewed as “not only a powerful organizer of individual developmental patterns, but also as consisting of processes that are themselves organized: self-generating and self-perpetuating in systematic ways” (Dannefer, 1992, p. 91). Some prior work has incorporated this perspective. “Within the systems conception, context shifts from the status of a static independent variable to a structured, interactive set of relations. Human development, then, is not just influenced by environment but is caught in these extended networks of relations, which systematically provide messages about what developmental outcomes are to be valued, and which supply specific, and sometimes limited, resources for development to individuals” (Dannefer, 1992, p. 91).

This fourth level poses a difficult challenge. While empirical analyses can describe the correspondence between social policy and observable behaviors, it is difficult to discern underlying social processes and mechanisms which create the correspondence. Moreover, under most circumstances, the researcher is observing social processes that are not changing or are changing very slowly, so the cause of behavioral change is difficult to attribute to specific social actions.