

Gil G. Noam

Life History and Transformation



Born in Tel Aviv, April 25, 1950. Studies in clinical and developmental psychology at the Freie Universität, Berlin (*Diplompsychologe*) and Harvard University (doctorate). Psychoanalytic psychotherapy training at Harvard Medical School. Habilitation in psychology at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. Associate professor of psychology/psychiatry and education, Harvard University. Director of the Hall-Mercer Laboratory of Developmental Psychology and Developmental Psychopathology at Harvard Medical School and McLean Hospital. His work focuses on longitudinal research, life history theory and a new area of specialization, clinical-developmental psychology. Book publications: *Developmental Approaches to the Self* (with Ben Lee) and *Adolescents and Their Families: Paths of Development* (with S. Hauser and S. Powers). — Address: Department of Human Development and Psychology, Harvard University, Larsen Hall 421, Appian Way, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.

I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg highly focused with specific goals, set deadlines, and fairly fixed notions of what I would write. Within the space of a month, I was immersed in the world of the Kolleg; e.g. dialogues and study groups with Fellows that went beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries; unparalleled ease of access to knowledge and culture; and always Berlin, unique, vibrant city of a thousand faces.

These experiences of this world did not change the essential direction of my work but they deepened it and added dimensions I might never have discovered. Through the particular form of intellectual exploration afforded by the Wissenschaftskolleg, where I could pursue any tour and detour of thought, the time in Berlin became a reference point for years to come.

My work centered around three related projects. First, I co-edited a book entitled *The Moral Self*, which represents a much needed dialogue between psychologists, sociologists and philosophers. This book was published with astonishing speed by MIT Press and appeared during my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Next, I set out to work on my main project, a

book for Harvard University Press, with the working title of "Biography and Transformation." In this book I use constructivist and interactionist perspective to discuss fundamental changes in academic developmental psychology and psychoanalysis. Building on two earlier papers ("Beyond Freud and Piaget: Internal Worlds-Interpersonal Self" and "Normative Vulnerabilities of the Self"), I introduce evidence against the traditional interpretation that psychopathology is necessarily a product of early developmental delay, arrest, or fixation. Rather, cognitive research from my Harvard Lab suggests that many forms of psychopathology are products of great complexity that emerge at later points in the life course.

By taking a lifespan-developmental perspective on risk and vulnerability, I am required to confront two related issues. 1. Within the context of cognitive and emotional development, how do symptoms and problems develop over time and in what ways do they become more complex? 2. What transition points in normal development allow the person to take a new perspective on old problems and to experiment with new growth-promoting interaction patterns? The book shows that life-span developmental research and cognitive studies provide critical clues into how psychopathology, but also resiliency develop. Equally importantly, the book charts how views of ones own biography become reshaped throughout life. Examples from literature such as Franz Kafka's and Virginia Woolf's writings; clinical cases and in-depth interviews from research are used to explore this tension between repetition in the life cycle and the transformational capacities that emerge in human development.

In a third project I analyzed and published cross-sectional and longitudinal data from clinical-developmental studies my associates and I have conducted over the past decade. Following at-risk youth into adulthood, I made great progress during the time in Berlin in understanding what factors differentiate those youth who overcome their severe problems (mostly delinquency, violence, depression, and/or suicidality) from those who continue on dysfunctional pathways. The findings support the hypothesis that formal treatment provides only a small aspect of recovery and that new meaning systems as well as intense relationships in everyday life represent key curative factors.

Besides a productive work life, there were many important moments and experiences that I can only try to capture in telegraphic form: The interactions: never-ending, never-repeatable conversations with colleagues some of whom became true friends; long Thursday night dinners that were more informative and creative than any formal learning context I have participated in for a long time. The beautiful setting. Often new ideas came sitting on the bench by the lake reading! Weekend travels through East Germany following Fontane's lead.

The language: German is my mother tongue but English has become my scientific and professional language. In Berlin I began to recapture my language and often began to think in German, even as I was writing English texts. Our two sons, Benjamin and David (six and three years old) learned a great deal of German and we work hard daily to keep it alive for them. The Family: The Wissenschaftskolleg and its Mitarbeiter could not have made families feel more welcome. My wife, Maryanne Wolf, a Fulbright Fellow at the Max-Planck-Institute for Human Development and Education participated in many of the scientific and cultural activities of the Kolleg. Further her Berlin research project is now completed and has begun to challenge current thinking on childhood dyslexia. Professional contacts: I gave talks at the Humboldt University, at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, the Maximilian University in Munich, cooperated with the Max-Planck-Institute for Human Development and Education, worked with the Suhrkamp Verlag on a book series, and avoided leaving the Wissenschaftskolleg as much as possible.

It was, indeed, an extraordinary time!