

Symbolic Competencies for Developmental Transitions: The Case of the Choice of First Names

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Abstract Human life consists of stability interspersed with ruptures. Transitions that follow such ruptures, offer a window on processes of change at the level of skill acquisition, identities, but also meaning construction. The article explores various uses of cultural elements such as books, movies or religious baggage as symbolic resources for such psychological development. It introduces the notion of interiority to have access to the work of these symbolic resources on emotions. Such uses of symbolic resources are examined through a study of the procedure of choosing first names during the transition to parenthood. The notion of symbolic competencies, as the abilities to use cultural elements as resources for thinking, action and development, is proposed to account for interpersonal differences and is discussed.

KeyWords adult development, first names, personal culture, symbolic competencies, symbolic resources, transition

Transition periods in a life-time are periods that follow events that have put at stake certain routines or taken-for-granted situations; such events can be seen as ruptures in the regular flow of one's experience. In adult life, transitions can follow a person's inner changes, some changes in his or her surroundings, or his or her relocation in other surroundings (change of profession, moving country); transitions can also follow wider societal events. Hence such ruptures call for processes of repositioning, and can invite new acquisitions, understandings and personal redefinitions. In that sense, transitions in adult life are occasions for development. During transitions, people might use symbolic elements as resources, as we have shown elsewhere (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson, & Psaltis, 2003). The argument which is discussed more thoroughly in this paper explores a particular zone of the problematic: when a person uses symbolic resources in a transition period, he or she does not only act upon his or her interpersonal, material and symbolic

surroundings, but also modifies his or her 'inner' life. After defining the model in which I am working, I will explore 'hidden' meaning construction processes occurring in one's interiority and linked to the use of symbolic resources as a possible contribution to an adult socio-cultural psychology of development.

Apprehending the Uses of Symbolic Resources in Transition

Cultural psychologies have contributed to our understanding of the developing person. Different approaches and theoretical orientations coincide in the acknowledgement of the social and cultural frames of the person as 'constitutive' of their thinking and activity (Bruner, 1996; Carugati & Perret-Clermont, 1999). The notion of 'personal culture' helps to identify the unique result of internalization or re-appropriation of available meanings with which people get acquainted through their interaction with people and semiotic objects (Tomasello, 1999; Toomela, 1996; Valsiner, 1998); personal cultures offer a basis for action and thought. Studies have shown that people do not only internalize and re-appropriate these symbolic elements that circulate and constitute the social spaces and the interactions in which they are engaged, but that in this process they may also contribute to these symbolic worlds by way of externalization (Valsiner, 1998).

In line with our previous work (Zittoun et al., 2003), this paper is located in a theoretical frame that admits the socio-cultural location of the person as a subject. It considers the person within symbolic worlds, but also the person as an active chooser and user of cultural elements as symbolic resources. Focusing on the role of the person within certain constraints, we have shown that she might 'choose', more or less reflectively, cultural elements in her socio-cultural environment or in her personal cultures as possible tools to act upon things. Cultural elements are complex symbolic constellations, such as objects or rites within family, religious or national traditions, which are shared diachronically, or such as books, novels or paintings, which are made out of organizations of semiotic units within discrete objects, synchronically available in a given society. Both types of cultural elements have a material substratum, and, in that sense, have a historical continuity, carrying once-encapsulated meanings beyond the fact that these are objects of ever-renewed reading or watching.

Cultural elements can be internalized and memorized; however, when they are 'used' to do something—to act upon social realities, to modify one's understanding—they become 'instruments' (as, for

example, in Vygotsky, 1930/1978, or in Winnicott, 1971/2001). To emphasize the active role of a person, we have called them '*symbolic resources*'. Symbolic resources are cultural elements which are mobilized by a person in a situation not related to the situation of their internalization, and which the person uses as means in order to do something (Zittoun, 2001b, in press).

An interesting issue is how a specific person will, in a given situation, choose one of the possible instruments at his or her disposal, and use it to solve the situation at hand. That instrument might be more or less efficient in that situation, and can be handled with more or less mastery. Phrasing the question of symbolic activity in terms of '*uses*' confers some importance to personal agency. It gives less emphasis to the relationship between a person and given cultural elements at the internalization phase, and more to the next moment—when these are re-mobilized and used in thought and action (of which externalizations might be one variation).

The outcomes of uses of symbolic resources can be various—these can be observed at the level of microgenesis of meaning, where their semiotic components might participate in processes of thought and emotion regulation (Valsiner, 2001). However, in cultural elements, semiotic components are organized and structured; their potential meaning content and transformative power results from their organized totality (Vygotsky, 1928/1971), and a person's interpretation of these, while infinite, is nevertheless constrained by this organization. Finally, as these are always socially, culturally and historically situated, their use might produce additional effects due to such connotations. Hence symbolic resources might have consequences not only for what the person *intended* to act upon or to do with the cultural element (what was consciously looked for), due to the many layers of symbolic functioning of such elements. These effects nevertheless come out of intentional uses of symbolic resources.¹

Hence, the metaphor of '*uses of symbolic resources*' offers a theoretical standpoint from which to examine various modalities of uses of cultural elements, their intended and unexpected outcomes, and skills these uses require. Uses of symbolic resources in challenging situations may lead the person to develop new skills and understandings. Additionally, as will be shown in this paper, such repositioning and changes might be expressed by means of new symbolic creations.

However, one question stays open in such a formulation: what happens between picking and grasping an available cultural element and being able to use it, and expressing new symbolic forms? What occurs between internalization and externalization? How can we detail

such movements, in a way that allows us to have a grasp on the inter-personal variation in how people use symbolic resources? In this paper, I will address this issue by exploring the implication of such uses within a person's interiority.

Transition in the Life-Course

A period of transition in a life-time is a period in which a certain number of taken-for-granted representations, understandings, routines or identities are put at stake. Produced by a simple translation in the social field, by a rupture in the social or societal world or by an inner move (Duveen, 1998; Erikson, 1975; Moscovici, 1973), a transition always supposes a socio-cultural relocation (Benson, 2001). Transition periods are particularly interesting candidates for examining emerging psychological changes: they might disrupt equilibrium, catalyse psychological processes or induce rearrangement, and thus offer natural laboratories for psychological development (Zittoun et al., 2003). A transition might not always be perceived as such by individuals (Grob, 2001; Lindenberger & Baltes, 2000); but some activities, linked to meaning construction, might indeed reveal that a person is dealing with a perceived transition, and engaged in processes of change.

Numerous studies have examined cognitive and social resources that might facilitate aspects of changes during transitions, and especially during youth. These studies have usually examined three types of changes for which resources are required (Perret-Clermont & Zittoun, 2002). These are linked to one's ability to act in the material and social world, and to reflect upon the social and the inner world. Since this division covers the possible uses of symbolic resources, and since these fields have been documented, I will use this analytical division through my paper. The three types of change are as follows:

1. The development and acquisition of specific social, practical and theoretical *skills and knowledge*, allowing someone to act, to communicate, to be legitimized, to behave and to think in a new position (Carugati, 2004; Heath, 1996, 2004; Perret & Perret-Clermont, 2001; Roulleau-Berger, 1991).
2. *The redefinition of identities*, involving the construction and mobilization of representation of oneself in the past, and of possible selves in a future at a given socio-cultural location. These representations draw on personal memories and socio-cultural representations, modulated by specific locations. Redefinitions are limited by one's sense of personal consistency and continuity.

3. The construction of a *personal meaning* of the transition itself and its components, and the inscription of this meaning in a general, not necessarily verbal, personal narrative. Such meanings require an elaboration of partly unconscious, emotional and bodily prolongations of one's experience. Meaning and emotional elaborations are the conditions for new learning or identity definitions; put in a meaningless situation, a person can have his or her thinking abilities inhibited (Aumont & Mesnier, 1992; Moscovici, 1994; Paín, 1981/1985, 1985).

Transitions allow us to envisage development as processes of changes at one, or more, of these three intermeshed levels. But change can take various forms, of which only some are developmental; a transition period is only an occasion for development (Lindenberger & Baltes, 2000). What, then, is a 'good', developmental, outcome of a transition, and what is a change which is not 'developmental'? Any affirmation regarding development involves a normative stance, and here I will try to clarify mine. To say that a transition is developmental implies that a person can leave the position he or she occupied before, and, on the basis of previous skills and/or knowledge, generate ways of thinking or acting which prepare him or her to find a pathway through uncertainty toward a new regularity. Its success supposes a double acknowledgement: by the environment, that is, recognition by others and a correspondence to the changed situation (the new actions or thought 'work'); and by oneself. On one side, it implies more than maintaining ways of doing and thinking that are now out-of-date, or more than radically adjusting to the requirements of a new given situation. It always requires the mobilization of something (a skill, a knowledge) that has been useful in the past to be transformed, re-composed or used in a radically new way. It might thus involve much trial and error, or many random explorations—it needs some time and space (i.e. the transition). On the other side, there is indeed a sense of being the same through the change that the person has to maintain; a change that 'works' might alienate a person from him- or herself and would hence be a 'bad' change. Yet too much fidelity to one's former self might alienate a person from the requirements of a new situation. Hence a flexible space for change is needed, where a 'good enough change' has to be found between maintaining pasts and creating newness. Each person's flexibility has a limit: unbearable psychic pain.

If symbolic resources can be used for psychological development during a transition period, they do so as part of this dynamic of mobilizing known ways of thinking, acting or representing in a new

fashion that is oriented toward the unknown. The metaphor of ‘uses’ of something by someone during a transition hence implies that someone can or cannot use, or can become an expert at choosing elements that can be turned into symbolic resources for a developmental outcome of the transition. In a developmental perspective, this might of course raise questions linked to ‘competence’ of symbolic uses, and thus have some heuristic interest that I will consider in the last section of this paper.

Interiority

When a person is said to experience a rupture and to engage in a process of change, this person needs to be defined in a way that gives room to describe the processes of uses of symbolic means through which he or she might be repositioned (toward others, within a given social field), through which he or she thinks and learns, and through which he or she experiences various meanings and their related feelings. If we were only to care about his or her abilities to act upon the world, we could talk about a person as a locus of action; however, we have just précised that the change might be *experienced* as such, thought of or felt. How are we then to designate the locus of the internalization of meanings encapsulated in shared cultural elements, where these become enough ‘one’s own’ so as to determine one’s ways of thinking and feeling, of producing meanings and of externalizing them, or of acting in the world?

Such a location is often designated as the ‘subjectivity’ of the person—being understood as one’s location within socio-cultural or interpersonal networks. This location results out of a person’s biography, moves in the field of social interactions and of symbolic streams, influences and resistances, internalizations and externalizations (Benson, 2001; Duveen, 2001; Valsiner & Lawrence, 1997). The notion of ‘subjectivity’ carries its opposition to ‘objectivity’—which is usually understood as designing the opposition between ‘real’ and ‘non-real’. However, if we take seriously the symbolic construction of the mind, or that cultural elements need minds to be made sense of, this distinction falls. As proposed earlier, symbolic elements have an incontestable, material substratum—a book, a song or a CD have a ‘real’ existence. They start to become organizers or meaning, feeling or action once they have been read or listened to by someone (the ‘cultural experience’—Zittoun, 2003b). The organization of sensual, emotional, visual and cognitive experience this allows is unique for each reader or listener—it is made of the stuff of his or her body, memories and emotions; and this, incontestably, is as much ‘real’ (even if it has

another form of material substratum). The location of the experience of the person must thus be localized differently. Theoretically, the notions of internalization and externalization designate the dynamics of integrating shared meaning and structures in a socialized mind, and of producing new symbolically mediated meanings that might affect the social world. What we try to designate here is a moment 'between' these two dynamics (Valsiner, 1998). Additionally, our phenomenological experience tells us that if books, churches and CDs exist in the shared world 'out there', interacting with such objects provokes something that must be said to exist 'in here' (what I feel and see when I listen to a song). It thus seems that a spatial metaphor allows to designate, or expand, that sequence of an ongoing loop of meanings. This space can thus be designated as 'interior', as opposed to an 'exterior' symbolic element (result of externalizations) that exists as a material, immobile, non-experienced object. I thus call 'interiority' the space where symbolic processes are mingled with a given person's experience, or where symbolic elements re-deploy their contents and organization while re-composing a person's memories. The notion of interiority thus specifies the nature of Vygotsky's description of cultural experiences: in his papers on poetry and on play he suggested that symbolic means open spaces to contain and transform feelings and explore possible experiences (Vygotsky, 1928/1971, 1931/1994). 'Interiority' thus metaphorically designates this *space*, where an imaginary experience is possible, thanks to the encounter between what the symbolic element, coming from the social and cultural world, proposes, and the fabric of one's memories, emotions and fantasies. It is where Harry Potter becomes 'my' Harry Potter, and where my memories of Italy are re-presented to me as I read *A Room with a View*. On one side, interiority is revealed by social, material symbolic realities, such as signs on a page or pictures on a film, designating shared socio-cultural entities. On the other side, these cultural elements allow someone to explore private imaginary spaces, where the truth-judgement is suspended: to 'see' a kind of internal movie when reading a book, to feel movements and emotions when listening to a song, or to feel modified once the last line of a poem just read finishes resonating (Grodal, 1997; Lázló, 1999; Lévi-Strauss, 1971/1990; Vygotsky, 1928/1971).

As indicated above, uses of symbolic resources might enable any of these three types of changes linked to a transition that we have just indicated. Defining interiority in such terms allows us to locate the third type of changes—the construction of meanings. Considering 'interiority' and what it 'feels like' to have a Harry Potter or a Verdi

experience also gives us a stance from which to consider why a person chooses this or that cultural element to orient his or her location, to initiate or refrain from such an action, and for what outcome. The notion of 'interiority' thus brings us to examine the meeting of the collective and the personal, enabled by a person's choices of cultural elements, at given moments. It also proposes examining what is 'between' internalizing and externalizing, 'between' one's encounter with symbolic streams and one's socially visible repositioning or action.

Moving to the study of processes occurring where 'interiority' has just been defined implies a change of theoretical perspective, and for this I will adopt other conceptual tools. In effect, socio-cultural psychology has only marginally addressed symbolic elaborations going on 'within' the person, or the cultural fabric of imagination and its emotional implications. On the other hand, psychoanalytical approaches have examined the processes of change and transformation enabled at the level of interiority through uses of symbolic-cultural means, as well as the link between affects and symbolization processes. I will thus draw on some of their theoretical tools, and, to ground the coming discussion, I will briefly present some of the propositions of such a framework.

Linking Affects and Memories, Symbols and Futures

In his synthesis of current post-Freudian psychoanalytic research, Green (1973/1992a, 2002) develops the Freudian metaphoric model of the 'psychic apparatus', where affects—rather than emotions—provoked by internal or external events, designate the dynamic, working aspects of drives. These are the 'embodied', non-conscious part of our emotional experiences. Out of this embodiment, affects diffuse through different layers of the psyche—from the body, to the unconscious, to the preconscious, from which they eventually reach consciousness. Along this journey, embodied affects can be connected to representation of things (mnemonic traces), and these can progressively be linked to the representation of words (or symbolic means allowing reflectivity). The latter can eventually emerge in consciousness through symbolic forms. Affects can be dangerous for the production of thought if they subsist without being attached to any representations, and, therefore, if they stay unacknowledged as such. Non-linked, they can become cleaved, like in the case of trauma, or they can be discharged through acting-out or somatization. Once an affect is linked to a representation and dynamizes it, the affect-and-representation can be repressed, or transformed to be consciously tolerable, and this can in turn modify deeper memories. Affects can

also be seen as signals emerging in the consciousness of such psychic movements (Green, 2002). On this basis, symbolization can be seen as the double linkage of, on one side, images and not-yet conscious psychic emotional events, and, on the other side, forms of symbolic, shareable manifestation (gesture, graphic, verbal), before becoming the object of a reflective loop. Affects that remain unlinked are susceptible to having indirect effects on one's chain of representational or symbolic means, and, in general, might disturb thought. In the case of trauma, whole zones of thought might be distorted—so as to avoid a given topic; in less pathological cases, un-symbolized affects can simply make irruptions in one's behaviour, perception or flow of discourse. In that sense, cultural experiences as experienced in one's interiority provoke or awaken memories and affects; but they also, simultaneously, offer symbolic forms to contain and re-present these memories or affects in a symbolic form; these can thus be re-apprehended as if they came from the outside, and the work of linking and transforming affects in one's thought might be facilitated. However, as we will see, such symbolic facilitations are not always the case.

The notions explored here allow us to focus on a person constituting a socio-cultural given semiotic constellation (a cultural element) into something relevant for him or her at a given point in time and space, and turning it into a symbolic resource. They allow us to examine in parallel the effects of uses of symbolic resources in the shared world and in the interiority of the person, before such uses eventually modify the person's relationship to the shared world.

Defining a Situation of Transition, and a Methodological Access to Symbolic Processes

Of course, it might be difficult to define methodological approaches to observe the effect of uses of symbolic resources in a person's interiority. One possible way is to try to define 'natural' situations of transitions involving necessarily some symbolic work. In other words, we need to have access to a given person's personal culture, and to the result of his or her uses of symbolic elements.

To approach this matter, I will examine one particular transition, the transition to parenthood, with a special focus on the choice of first names for the coming child (Zittoun, 2001b). Aiming to contribute to our understanding of transition periods in general, I will follow the analytical distinction proposed above. The transition to parenthood indeed involves skill acquisitions, identity changes and meaning construction, and has emotional and unconscious prolongations. A

developmental outcome of the transition to parenthood involves constructing a representation of the child to come, in the future, and of oneself as the parent of that child (Ammaniti & Stern, 1991). Such a representation will guide a lot of 'parental' activities. These constructions, implying one's reactivation of memories of one's own childhood and relationships to one's own parents, might awaken important affective loads and, in some cases, unconscious conflicting themes (Bydlowski, 1997). A symbolic, crystallized, observable outcome of the symbolic work going on at that time is the first name chosen for a newborn.

The study of symbolic dynamics linked to this transition is facilitated by the study of the procedures of choosing first names. This symbolic task indeed implies psychological processes connected to what can be distinguished as four symbolic functions of first names. First, names can be seen as signs of group or identity belonging. Second, they designate imaginary spaces, such as the fantasy, hopes, imagination, associated with a name, both in collective representation and in personal imaginaries. Third, names are symbolic objects with a sound, a rhythm, and a shape that can have bodily and affective prolongations. Fourth, they also might be associated with projects, or future representations of the child. Examining people's discourse regarding these levels of meaning associated to first names offers an access to the three layers of change processes identified above, and also to their representations of the future. Choosing first names implies, at the first level, subjective locations or re-positions of a person as a parent of a given child; in turn these relocations are linked with the parent's identity and his competencies as a parent. The second and third aspects, the imaginary and the sensual ones, are connected with a person's interiority. The fourth aspect shows us how a person, giving a name to a child, elaborates a future representation of the child and of herself as a parent and can thus give an indication of developmental outcomes of the transition.

The methodology chosen for this study is based on an attempt to reconstruct people's choices and uses of symbolic resources in a decision-making process (choosing a name) triggered by a 'real-life' transition. Forty semi-structured reconstructive interviews were conducted with parents, alone or in couples, three or four months after the birth of a child, about the procedure of choosing a name. The interviews were done *after* the choices, for theoretical and ethical reasons. First, given the fact that first names are chosen not at a given time and space, but sometimes even before the conception of a child, and given that the procedure of choices is distributed among an infinity of

moments (walking in a public space, listening to music, dreaming, etc.), to question people during the transition would not guarantee catching the 'real' procedure of choice. Second, the reflectivity provoked by such interviews might strongly influence the procedure of choice, and, for ethical reasons, it seemed incorrect to let the research potentially have a long-term influence on the parent-child relationship. Third, if a post-hoc interview implies rationalization, it asks people to mobilize their symbolic resources. Even if these are not the ones that were used at the time of the choice, we still have access to a given person's uses of symbolic resources. Interviews were effectuated both with mothers and with couples, for two reasons: first, the interviewee was offered the choice to be alone or in couple, so that they would feel comfortable; second, pilot interviews had shown that couples tend to talk about issues of negotiations, procedures and socio-cultural locations, whereas mothers by themselves tend to develop issues linked to personal and emotional life, uses of symbolic resources and interiority. The parents, out of a group contacted in a large Swiss town by way of their birth announcements in the newspaper, came from different social classes and cultural backgrounds; all of them spoke fluent French, the medium of the interviews.

The interviews included questions related to their choice procedure (names evoked but rejected, naming practices in use by their families), representations of the child, and the cultural elements mobilized through the name choice procedure. Notes were taken on the setting of the interview. The taped interviews were fully transcribed, and the transcription was verified by graduate students. The data were submitted to four types of analysis aiming at identifying the three level of changes of a transition: a content analysis documented procedures of choices and negotiations ('what's in a name'); some case-analysis allowed a tracing of individual decision procedures, couple negotiations and identity dynamics; a quantitative analysis allowed exploration of the link between future-oriented representations and uses of traditional resources; and finally an 'interpretative analysis' was done to identify processes at the level of interiority (this method will be specified later).

Naming a Child and the Uses of Symbolic Resources for Development

Symbolic objects are complex realities, and acting with or upon them might have many consequences as these have prolongations in the interpersonal, ideological, social, material, internal worlds. Parents intend to find names for their children; on the basis of the method just

discussed, I will show how they can use cultural elements, both traditional and mass-mediated, as symbolic resources for the transitions they live through.

The question of uses of symbolic resources for defining first names is specific to certain types of occidental, modern societies, where individuals are, in principle, free to define repertoires of names for their child, rules of composition of the names (first, middle, surname), and independent from ritualized naming ceremonies. In other forms of societies, naming procedures are, or have been, heavily regulated. First names indicate a child's group or familial belonging, classify him or her within the order of generations, and link him or her to specific meanings for the group's global *Weltanschauung* (Alford, 1987; Lévi-Strauss, 1962/1985; Zonabend, 1980). The slow decomposition of such 'traditional' ways of naming, although not homogeneous (neither geographically nor socially) (see Besnard, 1995; Jouniaux, 1999; Lieber-son, 1995; Lieber-son & Bell, 1992; Rabinovich, Pereira Hulle-Coser, Trovagnini, & Esteves et al., 1994), has accompanied the progressive abandonment of the powerful symbolic systems that once structured the visible and the visible world and its events in shared, meaningful ways (Geertz, 1966). One of the consequence of the loss of such comprehensive, available resources within given groups is that people have to choose among a much wider range of possible and often incompatible cultural elements when trying to elaborate their own worldview.

I will briefly present uses of symbolic resources that facilitate choosing first names, and uses that result in identity relocation (for similar uses of symbolic resources, see Zittoun et al., 2003). More attention will be given to the level of meaning construction and emotional elaboration in one's interiority.

Symbolic Resources for Learning and Resolving Tasks

A concrete task to solve during the transition to parenthood is finding a name for the coming child. It sometimes confronts the future parents with an extraordinary bewilderment, because they want names fitting complex and contradicting streams of requirements. They think about the signs of group, national, religious belonging they want others to see or not to see in the first name. They think about associations designated by the name, both personal (memories, tastes), and socially shared representations or cultural meanings. They evaluate first names as objects of the senses, with sound, taste and shape, and care about how they will fit with surnames or other names in the family. They imagine the child, or themselves as the parent of a girl called so-and-so.

They make projects of cultural transmission related to the cultural connotation of the first names. And they use all sorts of beliefs and shared representations about what should be a first name and how to find the 'right' one (it seems that it has to be a 'flash' of inspiration, a *'coup de foudre'*). The chosen first name will thus 'crystallize' these different levels of meaning and will be at the junction of internal elaborations, requirements, and *in statu nascendi* representations (Moscovici, 1997, 1999) and social and cultural influences and determinations.

There are some social, pragmatic and cultural aids to define a procedure of naming and a repertoire of possible names for a child. First, there are cultural 'heuristics' of choice such as making 'hit parades' or a lottery of chosen names. Cultural traditions offer heuristics such as fixing where the names should come from (father's father, deceased parents, godmothers, etc.). Social mediation, such as discussing with parents or friends, can facilitate these heuristics. Second, artefacts such as first-name books, web pages, family trees or movie credits offer symbolic resources for the constitution of 'repertoires' (collections of possible names fitting some requirements). The repertoire can be limited by aesthetic criteria ('round' sound, meaningful initials such as 'LOV'), or pragmatic ones ('John Smith is common, but not with a second name, such as John Eleazar Smith'). Finally, these cultural, social, mediative resources for the name choice allow a person to explore possible worlds, to imagine the coming child, or to get used to the idea of the coming child. Some parents try to write cards, and announcements, as if the child was there, and called so-and-so. These various resources contribute to confer on first names their various symbolic functions.

Symbolic Resources for Identity Redefinition

Future parents are generally aware of the social and cultural dimensions of the first names, and have to define what 'sort' of child they want to be the parent of. Moreover, mobilizing familial naming principles and repertoires, they examine their own identity-roots. Choosing a name is therefore a moment of mobilization of the representation of oneself in the past, as having carried a given identity, and of oneself in the future, as parent of the coming-growing child. It can be the moment to decide whether given identities' anchorages will be maintained, modified or refused.

In mixed or migrant couples, two traditions are salient: that of the parent, and his or her partner; and that of the context. Normal identity negotiations are highlighted and classical strategies can be observed

(see, e.g., Barbara, 1993; Hassoun, 1995; Varro, 1995). First, parents can choose one and abandon the other anchorage: for example, if the mother is Italian and the father French, the child might have a French first name. Second, they can find first names that fit both cultures—in the same example, Eva would be accepted as being both a French and an Italian name. Third, they can find first names exterior to these—in the same case, ‘Kevin’ is chosen because it is ‘American’ (neither Italian nor French). Fourth, the parents can meta-define the culture and traditions involved: for example, when one parent is Christian and the other Jewish, they can redefine their belonging as ‘people from the Bible’ and name the child after the Old Testament, such as ‘Jonathan’. A closer analysis reveals that these negotiations rarely exhaust the identity regulation processes. Second names, forgotten or eliminated names often carry important identity dimensions too (in the first example, for example, the ‘rejected’ mother’s Italian origin can be hidden in an Italian middle name). Given or evoked names appear to express given steps in one’s re-positioning process in some streams of cultural representations, but also contain, hide or designate the conflict which arises due to these relocation processes. These unformulated conflicts sometimes have secondary effects at the level of meaning construction and emotional elaboration, as we will see below.

A parent can decide to have a child who will become a certain type of adult, either similar to or different from what he or she is. A particular education will have to be given to the child by the parent. If the parents do not have the relevant identity-related knowledge, they may have to learn or acquire it, which often means changing their identity (Duveen, 2001; Hundeide, 2004). For instance, an atheist mother, willing to give a Catholic education to her child, will have to prepare a Christmas crib, and, therefore, act as a Christian person—which means that she develops an identity project including an identity-transformation.

Through this mobilization of representation of oneself in the past and the imagination of possible, parenthood future selves, the name choice procedure is thus related to identity redefinitions and relocations. In that sense, the procedure for choosing a first name mediates a certain developmental process, similar to the processes implied by adolescence (Josephs, 1997, 1998; Kraus, 1996; Tap & Malewska-Peyre, 1991). Here, these processes imply a stronger sense of negotiation with a partner and a stronger time-orientation than adolescence, at a biographical level and with past and future generations.

The procedure itself sustains elaboration processes, since it always requires mobilizing social representations and cultural elements related

to different assigned or chosen identities. These representations, cultural systems and elements can have a role in the scaffolding or the re-shaping of that process. For instance, people whose discourses evoke mainly familial traditions, stories and rites, principles and repertoires (also to refuse them) are more likely, on average, to develop a clear and consistent representation of the coming child and themselves in the future.² By contrast, people who mobilize fewer traditional elements, instead giving emotional and aesthetic reasons for their choices, are more likely to have an unclear, emotionally overwhelmed discourse with an absence of representation of themselves as parents (Zittoun, 2001b). Such tendencies may be explained by the fact that persons having an awareness of traditions (even to refuse to carry them on) confront the strong, inherent time-reorientation of any 'cultural baggage', the narrative they carry (about the genealogy, the group, historical or mythical) and the procedural and heuristic skills they transmit. Note that some cases escape such tendencies. All in all, these facilitations in identity-re-elaboration processes may be understood as being underpinned by meaning-construction processes.

Symbolic Resources for Meaning Construction and Elaboration of Experience

Meaning constructions presuppose an elaboration of the emotional, bodily and unconscious prolongations of the experiences due to a transition period. In the case of the transition to parenthood, this has particularly been highlighted through perinatal studies and the research on early interactions (Bydlowski, 1997; Bydlowski & Candilis, 1998; Mazet & Lebovici, 1998; Stern, 1995). These researches have shown that people are actively engaged in the elaboration of three partly unconscious questions. One regards intergenerational relationships: becoming a parent means that instead of being defined as a child of one's parent, the person now becomes a parent. This pushes, at least symbolically, the parent's parents to the side of ageing person, and, possibly, death—and confronts oneself with one's own future ageing process. Second, sex differences are obviously actualized during pregnancy; one's relationships to one's own gender and to the partner's are questioned. Third, the person is confronted with questions that can provoke anxieties, such as the mystery of the origin of life, unbearable future deaths, or risks of sicknesses and handicaps. Finally, people will have to deal with the tensions, ambivalences or latent conflicts provoked through learning or identity re-elaborations.

As proposed, since we know that people cannot rely anymore on generalized meaning systems to deal with such tensions (cf., Kaës,

1996; Nathan, 1991), we have to examine how individuals use symbolic resources that they mobilize out of their 'personal culture' and to see if, and how, this allows them to work through these experiences. Note that here it is assumed that the meaning people find in given cultural elements cannot be reduced to interpretations obtained through any textual or discourse analysis of the cultural element itself (see also Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Lineburger, & Wright, 2001; Lembo, 2000). Such uses of symbolic resources would hence belong to phenomena located in one's interiority.

Practically, these processes can't be observed. On the basis of the previous theoretical assumptions and the particular object of inquiry, I developed a method of 'interpretative analysis' (Zittoun, 2001b). This interpretative analysis constructs and combines three layers of meaning.³ First, it looks at a person's various externalizations at a given moment and place. In the discourse, it examines emotional loads associated to various themes, on the basis of different cues—redundancies and contradiction within the form or the content, at the phonological or semantic level. It also considers other means of symbolic expression—one's choices of clothes, objects in one's house, destination of holiday, first names that have been envisaged or rejected—that can confirm or contradict the saliency of themes identified in one's verbal expressions. In the case of this population, the analysis is guided by the literature on the transition to parenthood, in order to identify the difficulties that parents address. Second, the person's life-story regarding a given issue—here, naming—is reconstructed. Third, these life-stories, and the emotional highlights, are compared at the semantic and structural level with the cultural element mentioned by the person; hypotheses are made about the resonance that the latter might have had for a person. This method does not, however, try to understand or to 'interpret' in a clinical sense the origin of the emotional issues inferred through cues in one's discourse.

To explore the developmental work of symbolic resources in a person's interiority I will examine the contrasting uses of symbolic resources by two mothers—different symbolic functions of similar cultural elements are mobilized. These two cases are presented as exemplars; they are two illustrations of tendencies emerging in all the cases, and their interpretation is corroborated by the four analyses mentioned in the previous section.

Let us first consider the mother of Arthur and Camille. These two children both have two middle names, referring to the two parental families, Catholic and Muslim, and intended to be signs of their

high-class belonging. The mother's discourse is consistent and reflexive; it loses its clarity, and appears overwhelmed by emotions only on specific points. First, several cues indicate that it seems hard for her to define how to be a woman in her virile, conservative, professional environments. She rejects some representations of femininity, such as some 'dirtiness' and weakness or vulnerability; she looks for gender-ambivalent first names. On the other hand, her models of women, who are Camille, Claudel, Cassandre, take on a strong sensual, passionate, mystic femininity. She seems to try defining a way of being a Christian, warrior and mother, androgynous and passionate woman. Second, she seems to have an ambivalent relationship to her husband's Muslim family—she both does not acknowledge it, and acknowledges it by giving third Muslim names to the children. Other women have similar conflicts, notably in relationship to their femininity. In some cases, these ambivalences are strong enough to invade the whole discourse and to prevent the parent elaborating positive representations of the coming child. Here, conflicts seem sufficiently well elaborated for this not to happen.

How can the mother of Arthur and Camille be said to have used symbolic resources for that elaboration? One of the cultural elements this woman mentions and values is the *Avalon* series of Marion Zimmer-Bradley's novels that she reread during her pregnancies. Arthur is the hero of the series—an adaptation of the Arthurian myths. At the heart of the narration is a royal line in a period of political trouble. The plots are mainly related to the fact that the families and every single character have to position themselves in a field of tensions: oppositions between a dark, old religion, close to witchcraft, including magic and supernatural power, vs. Christianity, rational, pure, light; compulsory alliances vs. chosen loves (often forbidden ones); compromise to socio-political and familial pressure vs. loyalty to one's inner truth and destiny. Guinevere is the wife of Arthur. Fair-haired, Christian and pure, she hides her love for Lancelot, connected to the old religion. In order to smother her passion, she persuades her husband to start a war against the old religion, too close to her desire. Her religion becomes rigid and devout and she forces herself to love her husband, but fails in giving him a son that could continue the line. On the other side, Morgan is a fairy-woman; small and dark-haired, she has been initiated to the antic religion of Avalon. She revolts against this fairy life and engages in terrestrial loves, such as with Arthur. Arthur is chained to his royal fate, but is the father of Morgan's child. In order to please his wife Guinevere, he will renounce all contacts to this Old World.

If we compare what we know of that woman's life and that narrative, resemblances appear at the semantic and structural levels. In the tale and in 'real life', the hero-women belong to socially important Christian lines, and are aware of their responsibilities in their continuations. Some of the difficulties not explicitly formulated by the young woman are discussed and unfurled in the narrative, such as the idea that the obscure origin of the husband could be a danger against which Christianity has to be imposed, or the two conflicting aspects of femininity (pure Christianity and darker desires), which are split onto two characters.

Thus there is a resonance between life and tale (Kaës, 1998; László, 1999), based on similarities at the level of the plot, the content, and some quality of feelings. It could be said that the Arthurian story offers possible representations and amplifications of relevant problematics for this woman. In this perspective, thanks to this resonance, the narration elected by the woman creates in her interiority containers for unformulated ideas, takes in strong ambivalent feelings, and unpack these 'knots' in narrative lines. According to a psychoanalytical perspective, narratives such as folktales allow an excorporation of some personal, internal unelaborated experiences, memories, feelings, thanks to identification processes; some internal aspects are thus distributed among the story's characters. Once loaded, the narrative fabric follows its way: there is a temporal and causal organization and succession, power relationships change, tensions are resolved. In this sense, when persons elect a story, they delegate some tensions and some internal contents, let the narration transform them, and reincorporate them in a transformed, elaborated way. Thus, the transformational dynamics inherent to a time-oriented symbolic resource can allow, in turn, a transformation of the contents deposited by the persons (Green, 1969, 1973/1992a, 1992b; Kaës, 1996; Ricoeur, 1985/1988). This reshaping is made in a culturally shared form, and the rules that structure these conflicts are socially and culturally acknowledged (Kaës, 1998). Here, we may say that this woman used the 'narrativization' function of a symbolic resource, which allows a developmental process to happen—conflicts do not prevent her from representing herself as mother and the coming child.

In contrast to this example, I will consider the mother of Celine. Here, the mentioned and chosen names are not explicitly related to identity dimensions, but these refer to French history (Manon, Marion) and French songs. This woman does not articulate questions related to lines or cultural transmission, although she mentions that her relationship to her stepfamily is conflictual. In contrast with the former case,

the discourse is difficult to follow, with brutal topic changes and high contrasts between cold and emotionally invested parts. There are neither representations of the child in the future, nor evocations of images of the young woman as a mother. The mother mentions two important cultural elements: the song from which her daughter's name comes, and which she used to sing in holiday camps as a teenager and her passion for French history.

The main problems she appears to have to deal with refer to her separation from her mother. She explains having grown up without a father, and thus having been close to her mother. She married her husband young, to create her own family, and to gain some distance from her mother. However, although her early motherhood seems to concretize such an attempt, some indices in her discourse and other expressions suggest that the separation is not achieved, or, at least, that there is some confusion about the nature and the depth of this link. Hence, in her discourse, the woman makes pronoun confusions when referring to herself and/or her mother; she replicates her mother's way of naming a child (choosing a name long before meeting her husband); the baby's name is similar to her own; she justifies her passion for history by the fact that her mother has introduced her to it, using strong verbs such as having been 'bifurcated' into it, and being 'hooked' in it—as one could be hooked in an addiction. She thus seems to want to cut her link to her mother, without being able to extricate herself.

When asked about novels she likes, she mentions *Angelique*, a romantic historical novel, and de Buron's books—she doesn't mention any plot or narrative elements. She mentions a character, jumps to questions related to her mother, and speaks about the 'universe' created by these stories; the narrative universe and her real life are entwined. For instance, the same sentence switches from her admiration for the novel's character of the King, to the real Château de Versailles, which she once visited, and that period's dresses; the importance she gives to clothes and decor is strong enough to justify her religious marriage in the beautiful church and dress.

In a psychoanalytical perspective, two very basic mental gestures deeply related to the first psychic and interpersonal experiences are conditions for emotions and experience to be 'mentally graspable' (Bruner, 1966; Piaget, 1937/1954; Tisseron, 1994; Winnicott, 1971/2001). 'Containing' abilities find their origin in the experience of one's own bodily skin-limits. The sense of containing is fundamental both to hold some ideas in mind, and to keep an inner sense of consistency and integrity. 'Transformation' abilities are related to the first experiences

of having an effect on the world or the world having an effect on us. They are the basis of all causal, associative, further psychic transformational experiences and actions. Difficulties in containing can be problematic in later life. Nevertheless, cultural experience can precisely contribute to the reinforcement of such abilities (Tisseron, 1990, 1995, 1999): for instance, looking at the same picture again and again allows one to make the experience of a very structured, containing space, which stays there in its fixity; one's eyes and emotional-cognitive experiences during reading are contained by its surface and its frame. Transformation of an indigestible separation can progressively be achieved through playing again and again with the scarf of a lost loved one. This manipulation both helps the progressive re-introjection of the emotional weight of the loss excorporated on the scarf, and reinforces the inner abilities to transform (without this 'external' help). Similarly, the strange experience of waiting for a child can be facilitated by the name choice procedure when young parents find indirect ways to contain and manipulate ideas and emotions attached to the (unthinkable) coming child, such as active consultations of books, web-page surfing, construction and deconstruction of lists, preparation of fictive announcement cards—trying, playing with names and possibilities, investing and rejecting possible names (Zittoun, 2001b). Transformational activities reinforce mental schemes and the assimilation of experience with its emotional and unconscious prolongations.

Let us return to the example. Here, it is harder to see on what grounds the mother finds a 'resonance' with the cultural elements. Nevertheless, there is an emotional proximity to the history of France—through the mother's passion—and an emotional nostalgic attachment to the song, designating memories of adolescent groups and togetherness. It may be that the heroes of the novels are associated with the mother and the women herself; and stories about royal lines are related to intergenerational and gender relationships. This young woman's uses of symbolic resource can be understood at two levels. First, the universe of the history of France—rooms, clothes—seems to offer a 'containing' world, an emotional, almost maternal consolation; here, unlike in the first example, boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred. Second, the words of the song represent a person asking an older woman why she never remarried, affirming that she will not be forgotten, and finishing with 'we will stay with you'. If we compare these words with the woman's situation, some resemblances appear: in that song, as it is the case for her, it is really hard to leave a lonely older person—one's own, unmarried mother—to go and live a life on one's own. It seems that this song strongly echoes the refused

dependency of this woman on her mother, as appears in her discourse and in the cultural choices. However, she seems unaware of the meaning of this song, designated by the baby's first name. I propose to consider that this symbolic resource—the song—has here acquired a 'deposit' function: a complex, difficult to contemplate, heavily emotionally loaded problem of the mother–adult daughter relationship seems to be deposited in the first name, safely attached to the baby, so as to wait until it will be possible to reflect upon it. Remaining unthought, however, this problem diffuses within the person's discourse and actions.

Symbolic Competencies and Development

Our exploration of a specific transition period has shown that cultural elements can be used as resources for developmental processes, at the level of acquisition of skills and knowledge and for identity re-elaboration and personal relocation, which are expressions of one's subjectivity. At another level, to understand how such changes 'make sense' for the parents, we inferred some dynamics of the interiority, and saw that symbolic resources can have a function in the containment, the transformation and the elaborations of unconscious emotions and conflicts related to the transition.

I proposed that a transition period can be said to be developmental when the person constructs means allowing her to acknowledge in some proportion the new realities and to deal with these without causing alienation or suffering. I suggested that, in the case of the transition to parenthood, such an outcome should imply the elaboration of representation of oneself as possible parent and of the coming child. As illustrated in two examples, the analysis of the data revealed different outcomes of such transitions. Some parents develop clear representations of themselves in the future, engage in learning and relocation processes, try to confer meaning on the event and on the life of the coming child, and modify their personal narratives. In their discourse, unconscious representations, emotions and conflicts related to these experiences, though present as harmonic echoes of the discourse related, barely invade. The transition period seems to be used as an occasion of development. Some other parents seem less able to do this; they develop less clear representations, have more inconsistent views about their lives and the child, and struggle to inscribe the events within a sense of continuity. Unconscious emotions and ambivalences seem to unwillingly invade the discourse or are absolutely banned.

Different types of uses of symbolic resources seem to generally accompany with these more or less developmental conclusions of the transition. On one side, two main types of uses of symbolic resource seem to allow persons to elaborate emotions and conflicts, to facilitate meaning construction, and, hence, seem developmental. One is the use of cultural elements for a complex *narrativization function*, as shown earlier; in the transition to parenthood, historical novels, quasi-mythological narratives, the Bible, classic movies such as family sagas, were used for such functions. They allow the expression and the symbolization of representations and emotions, and might have a transformative effect on them (Segal, 1991; Vygotsky, 1928/1971). Another developmental use is given by a *metaphorization function*. Different types of stories and narratives furnish metaphors, and cultural practices and rites, religious habits, familial traditions and professional bodies of practices offer similar resources. For instance, a woman uses her knowledge of the fabrication of a wine as a metaphor allowing her to think about her pregnancy and the part played by unpredictability in the result of a long construction process. This allows her to ‘map’ unrelated fields, to enrich the fields with the other’s meanings and to generate new associations (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Ricoeur, 1976). On the other side, some uses of cultural elements lead instead to the isolation of some conflicts and ambivalent emotions, or to the prevention of their elaboration. In that sense, such uses are not directly developmental, although they can contribute to further elaborations. Here, we have seen the use of the *containing function* of a cultural element, such as the use of the French history, and the use of its *deposit function*, such as the function of a song mentioned earlier. Any image or part of a cultural element or its memory can have such functions.

The question is therefore to understand why some people use the developmental functions of cultural elements, such as narrativization and metaphorization, and others use the containing and deposit functions. More or less ‘developmental’ uses of symbolic resources are not strictly related to the type of cultural elements, but to one’s potential psychic abilities to deal with some problems; different persons can refer to the same cultural narrative and use it in different functions. It is nevertheless the case that some cultural elements are more likely to be useful for persons when they are closer to the thematic that preoccupies a person (Zittoun, 2001b), or when some socio-cultural commonalities facilitate one’s resonance with an element, or, finally, when the cultural element has a more or less complex way to apprehend a specific problematic—including its complexities and variations, and references to a social and cultural order.

Elsewhere, we have explored the social and symbolic constraints that might be exerted upon a person's uses of symbolic resources (Zittoun et al., 2003). In this paper, I propose to examine the 'abilities' to use symbolic resources, for better or for worse in terms of developmental outcomes. I will call *symbolic competencies* that which might allow developmental uses of symbolic resources.

Proposing an additional notion, I am aware of defying any Occamian decency. However, my attempt is justified here by the need to account for the empirical evidences discussed, as they emerge out of a change of metaphor in our apprehension of symbolic dynamics. This being said, let us consider the exploratory notion of symbolic competencies to designate the group of skills allowing 'developmental' uses of symbolic resources—uses that allow symbolic elaboration rather than mere emotional containing or just task-solving (i.e. naming a child).

Drawing upon developmental literature, I will attempt to identify some of the sub-abilities that symbolic competencies might encompass. First, they involve skills connected to the decoding of symbolic language—understanding texts or graphic forms; and forms of 'media literacy' (knowledge of genres, classical plots or forms, etc.), enabling to construct the intended meaning. Second, recent studies suggest that they include sub-abilities such as maintaining the distinction between reality and imagination, and mental 'containing'; this also includes an ability to use a symbol in a reflective way—as a means to reflect upon one's own states of mind. These reflective abilities are themselves the result of the internalization of early symbolically mediated interactions (Nelson, 2002). These elementary mental movements of containing and reflectivity constitute what has been called a 'mentalization' ability (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002), and seems to designate phenomena of micro-semiotic regulations of affects (Valsiner, 2001). But then, if one can thus enter a world of imagination, a third set of operations is needed to link a symbolic reality, imaginary worlds or worlds of 'what-ifs', with a given real one (Segal, 1991)—which includes analogic or metaphoric abilities, knowledge transfer, and so on (Gardner & Wolf, 1983; Marton & Säljö, 1997; Salomon, 1979). Fourth, these links between a given 'fictional' world and one's own experience in the real world can be experienced in an unaware way, can be acknowledged by a person, can be looked for, or can even be searched for with expertise regarding what element might be useful in what situation. We can thus also expect more or less reflectivity on one's uses of symbolic resources (Zittoun et al., 2003). A person can know that she feels blurred after a disconcerting novel, a person can be looking for a 'feel-good' movie on a sad day, or a person can be

looking for a given passage of his favourite text that might help him to grasp an issue he is dealing with (Zittoun, 2003a). In every case, the person is engaged in intentional actions, and has a given aim; all three cases can mediate changes—even if the ‘developmental’ aim is intended only in the third, where the use of the symbolic resources is deliberate and implies a reflective look on its outcomes. In sum, on this basis, symbolic competencies might be said to include familiarity in a particular symbolic language or form, an ability to use its semiotic components to contain and reflect upon emotions these might regulate, an ability to link possible worlds to real worlds, and, finally, a metability to reflect these steps, so as to direct or anticipate them.

The notion of ‘symbolic competencies’ proposes a new perspective on the person’s uses of symbolic resources in transitions, in their everyday social and cultural locations. It designates a set of complex skills and abilities, allowing a person to use cultural elements as resources for symbolic elaboration, required for any further meaning elaboration, identity transformation, construction of new understandings or acquisition of skills required for these transitions.

As suggested in this paper, examining the uses of symbolic resources and symbolic competencies implies overcoming established theoretical divisions between rational and narrative thinking, cognitive and emotional processes, conscious and unconscious experiences. The study of symbolic competencies might thus contribute to conceptualizing symbolic thinking in adult life (Labouvie-Vief, 1992). Finally, symbolic competencies can be encouraged and trained, and, when acquired, can play an important role in psychological development (Tisseron, 2000; Wolf & Heath, 1992; Zittoun, 1996, 2001a). They may indeed allow a person to use cultural elements available within given socio-cultural constraints, in order to deepen his or her grasp and involvement in his or her life, and his or her ability to resist some other cultural elements—such as becoming critical toward some media. In sum, having looked at processes of changes from the perspective emerging from the metaphor of ‘uses of symbolic resources’, I suggest that the notion of symbolic competencies might enrich our understanding of adolescent and adult psychological development.

Notes

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1. In an etymological sense, 'intention' comes from the Latin *intendere*; between the 12th and the 15th century it takes meanings as different as having one's attention applied to, longing for, listening to, or understanding something. One interesting meaning, from *arcum intendere*, means to tense one's bow, which evolves into 'to have one's attention/mind tensed towards something'. From that, the notion of *intentio* has in middle French a similar sense of 'application, attention', eventually linked with 'project, will, moral end', and so on (Wartburg, 1928), therefore the idea of 'to apply one's mind to a given object' (Y. Greub, personal communication, March 2002).
2. A quantitative analysis based on a clinical frame of discourse analysis (Ammaniti, Candelori, Pola, & Tambelli, 1999; Ammaniti & Stern, 1991) and sociological insights (Coenen-Huther, 1994) allowed the examination of the relations between the parents' awareness of transgenerational issues and memories and their own capacity to work through the cognitive and affective challenges related to this particular period. A variable 'elaboration of the transition' is operationalized attributing the discourse to one of three modalities (balanced–disinvested–emotionally overwhelmed) on the basis of the balance between primary and secondary processes (Green, 1969, 1995/1997), and of clarity in the uses of pronouns, general consistency, time orientation, etc. The relationship to transgenerational baggage and memories is operationalized in four modalities: an awareness of that received heritage, and the will to continue it (Continuity); the same awareness with a will of rupture (Discontinuity); no awareness at all of such questions (Anomy); the exhumation of lost cultural baggage, present higher in the family tree, but not transmitted by the parents, for a restoration of a transmission (Exhumation). Codifications have been effectuated by three independent observers. Categories cannot be explained by socio-educational factors.
3. It includes the following. First, there is a reconstruction of the present transition period of the person, and of its relationship to his or her biographical lines (Bar-On, 1995; Kohler Riessman, 1993; Rosenthal, 1993). Second, there is a review of the cultural elements mentioned by the person, and a close examination of the most relevant books, songs, movies, etc. Third, there is an identification of the 'conflicting knots' in the discourse: less elaborated problems related to the transition to parenthood. When not explicitly mentioned, such 'conflicting knots' are indicated by changes of emotional intensity by repetitions, contradictions, by cross-thematic semantic fields, by phonologic recurrences (Ammaniti et al., 1999; Freud, 1900/1960a, 1901/1960b, 1905/1960c; Green, 1969, 1992b, 1995/1997; Tisseron, 1990). *Identifying* these knots does not mean to attempt *explaining* them (which would imply a real clinical work). Fourth, this interpretative analysis includes a parallel reading of the personal story with its non-elaborated questions and the mentioned cultural elements, both in their

presentation by the person and in my own reading. This finally allows inferring whether, and how, the symbolic resource has been used by the person.

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Biography

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