

# Uses of symbolic resources in the transition to parenthood<sup>1</sup>

Tania Zittoun

*Universities of Cambridge & Neuchâtel*

## SUMMARY

To explore uses of symbolic resources — movies, novels or songs — in transitions, this paper examines the semiotic work in which future parents engage. A five-steps sequence is identified within the procedure of choosing a first name for the child to come. People can be said to create a sense of rupture and a field of possibilities, to anchor it into their past, and to project it into the future and the social world. First names finally appear to acquire various. Symbolic functions. Symbolic resources are thus shown to participate to the emergence of newness.

## UNCERTAINTY AND SEMIOTIC PROCESSES IN TRANSITIONS

Ruptures are interesting moments to study psychological work and the emergence of newness (Dewey, 1934; Piaget, 1973; Peirce, 1878). For a person or for a group, a rupture is the loss of a previous taken-for-granted; it brings a sense of *uncertainty* that can call for activities leading to a new regularity; these activities constitute the work of *transition* (Perret-Clermont & Zittoun, 2002; Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivanson & Psaltis, 2003). The work of transition can be said to imply three interrelated processes: a person's relocation and repositioning within social and symbolic networks, and with it, of social and subjective identity redefinition; the acquisition of skills and knowledge required by these; and meaning constructions, implying the elaboration of emotions and of the unconscious prolongations of experience, as well as the maintenance of a sense of continuity (Bruner, 1990; Benson, 2001; Duveen, 2001). In particular, meaning-making processes can be seen as attempts to transform a perceived uncertainty.

*Uncertainty* can be presented from a semiotic perspective, drawing on Pierce (1868a, 1868b, 1878). In a semiotic metaphor of thinking, meaning making appears as a continuous flow, made out of semiotic mediators that serve to apprehend new events. This requires, first, for some semiotic mediator to be in the mind; second, it requires for the new event to be somehow grasped; third, it needs a link to be established between these two elements. This new link, in turn, usually modifies the new event and turns it into a new mediator; it modifies the existing mediators; and it thus modifies the whole structure of understanding of the person. Thinking is thus an ever-going three-steps dance. From a theoretical perspective, *uncertainty* would correspond to the interruption of this automatic linking. It can be due to the lack of existing semiotic means, to the radical novelty of the given, or also, because there is an oscillation between possible semiotic mediators. From a phenomenological

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been realised thanks to a European Marie Curie Fellowship, a Swiss National Research Fund Fellowship, and a Corpus Christi College (Cambridge) Research Fellowship.

perspective, uncertainty might be perceived as a tension, a form of discomfort, a worry or an anxiety. Uncertainty is thus an ill-adjustment between the given and the state of a person's representational abilities.

Various resources can be used as tools for working through transitions and reducing their related uncertainty, some of which are shared and cultural (Vygotsky, 1930). I will examine *uses of symbolic resources*, that is, cultural elements, such as books, images, movies, or ritualized actions, *used by a person intending doing something* in situations that exceeds the situation in which they have been internalized (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson & Psaltis 2003; Zittoun, 2001). These situations are often *cultural experiences*. A cultural element is indeed made out of a semiotic organization, which enables the person who interacts with it to have an imaginary experience, in which, like in play, the reality status is suspended, but where emotions appear as real. Cultural experiences can bring to states of esthetical absorption, to intense emotions, or to explore alternative possibilities; they thus can transform a person's understandings and conducts (Vygotsky, 1928; Winnicott 1971; Benson, 2001; Zittoun, 2005). A symbolic resource is often the use of such an experience or its memory.

Exploring how people use symbolic resources in the work of transition to parenthood, I propose a five-steps sequence of the process of "making of the name". I will thus show that, on a time line, a rupture first needs to be created; this can lead, second, to the growth of a foggy field of uncertainty; third, to be delimited, this field can be linked to past events, and, fourth, to future ones; fifth, out of this, new symbolic forms can emerge, crystallizing complex streams of meaning and emotions. This paper thus contributes to a reflection on the emergence of newness shared with Flora Cornish and Alex Gillespie (this volume)<sup>2</sup>.

## 1. CONSTRUCTING THE RUPTURE

What is the rupture that leads to the transition to parenthood? Psychologically, a rupture is perceived as such by a person relatively to her previous apprehension of things; it cannot be decided *a priori*. The data I am referring to informs about activities necessarily related to a person's perception of a rupture: engaging in birth-preparation, or thinking about names for the child. Some women tell how as little girls, they thought that such-or-such first name would be the one they would give to a child one day — which they indeed did. Some women seem not to engage in thoughts about the child until a few weeks before the birth — they would neither think about first names, nor modify their everyday life until quite late — as if nothing had been changing. In some cases, doctors, friends, family, magazines or manuals can mediate the experience of the rupture; they can help the person to formulate and reflect upon the event of becoming a parent, and they can point to various activities preparing the birth in which the future parents have to engage, such as furnishing a

---

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on a 40 semi-structured, reconstructive interviews with parents of one or more children. These interviews have been done a few months after the birth of the last child, in French (my mother tongue), in a French-speaking town. For more detailed presentations of choosing a name or on the transition to parenthood, see Zittoun, 2001; 2002; 2004.

room, of finding a name for the child to come. I assume that the *end* of the transition is the elaboration of a representation of oneself as a parent and the related representation of the child to come (Ammaniti et al., 1999; Bydlowski & Candilis, 1998). In the limit of this study, I will consider the semiotic task of finding a name as an indicator of thinking activities related to the construction of such representations. Finding a name is thus defined as goal of that transition.

## 2. CREATING A FIELD OF POSSIBILITIES

The second step is the beginning of the conducts linked to finding first names. People seem to ask: How to do? How do other people do? What are the criteria, the rules? How to make a repertoire of possible names, and how to choose within? How to compose a name with a first name, a middle name and a surname, or how to know about the rules of composition of names? Some persons have a strong sense of family habits, religious or national traditions, which canalize the definition of repertoires and the composition of a name (Valsiner, 1998). When name-giving is structured by such diachronic boundaries, there is also often a canalization of other aspects of the transition to parenthood — pregnancy, birth-rites, and meaning of social repositioning (i.e., acceding to parenthood) (Levi-Strauss, 1971; Nathan, 1991). In such cases, the internalized culture organizes the choices and the activity in a non-reflective way; therefore I will not consider such cases as uses of symbolic resources.

What is more specific to our socio-historical location is that people's internalization of such vertical boundaries is partial, if not absent; no consistent "collective culture" is unanimously shared and self-evident. People have therefore engage in constructing their "personal culture" (Valsiner, 1998), and constitute their own rules and constraints for naming and social repositioning. Examining uses of symbolic resources gives access to people's "hricolage" (Levi-Strauss, 1971), their self-made symbolic constructions.

So, what do people do when they think about possible names for their child? As they have set a new goal, their sphere of life changes (Lewin, 1939): it starts to be filled by possible names, and they start to notice these. They start to watch films to the end, hoping to find a name in the credit lists. They notice names in the stories they like, or remember names from songs, or hear them in the street. They browse newspapers, encyclopedias, dictionaries, magazine, or birth announcements in newspapers. They buy books on first names, and they explore websites devoted to that topic. They thus use newspapers, encyclopedias and credit list, whose social function is not to be name providers, as symbolic resources for achieving their goal of finding names.

The result of such uses of symbolic resources is the constitution of a *repertoire* of possible names — usually a list, on a bit of paper, on a nice notebook, or in their mind. For example, Ann's repertoire for two children has included: Slobodan and Kilian both seen on credit lists, at the movie; Donovan, taken from the encyclopedia; Cilianne — for a girl, seen on TV; Dayana; Damaris, from a dream, Fabienne, in reference to a childhood friend; and Leida — after Lerida, a Spanish village where the couple once spent nice holidays. This repertoire is thus constrained within the person and the couple's socio-cultural location, and their personal and shared

experiences. The repertoire thus constituted has also a sort of internal logic: the names are characterized by a general phonic and graphic “tone” — recurrent sounds such as *an*, *da*, *ei*, or a general “color” — organized by logic of sensual, emotional experience.

An additional, unintended outcome of the constitution of a repertoire is the creation of a *foggy field of possibilities*, made out of the possible names for the coming child and their associated ideas. The emergence of this field of possibilities is generated through these browsing, manipulating, and playing activities. Its importance is great for it forms the symbolic zone, or rather, the *symbolic crib*, the imaginary space out of which the name of the real child might emerge (Benson, 2001). Together with this name-in-the-making, representations of the possible child to come are generated and imagined (Moscovici, 1997, 1999). Such representations of a child to come have been called “imaginary child” by clinicians (Ammaniti et al., 1999; Mazet & Lebovici, 1998; Stern, 1995). The “real” child will come to life within these pre-existing representations; will be predetermined by meanings finding their roots in personal memories and fantasies, and internalized social representations. This symbolic crib can thus be said to be the parent’s zone of proximal development (Vygostky, 1930).

### 3. PAST ANCHORAGES

*Anchoring in the past* is the third step I want to consider. Names considered in the repertoires often refer to memories of the parent’s past — a childhood friend or a doll. At times, names designate shared memories: the name of a place where the couple has been on holidays or working together. Sometimes, the names come from articles once read by the couple, or a song listened together. In such cases, it is not the name that designates the given memory; rather, the name designates a cultural element — here, the article or the song that has been shared in the past. Independently of its content, the symbolic resource is thus used, first, as a *pointer*, to fix that moment of sharing a cultural experience and its related feelings; second, it might be said to be used to indicate the past relationship, as a way to *stabilize* it in time. In a comparable way, people might consider names designating wider, long-term histories, or a national, religious past — for example, a name that related to a tradition of naming in the village of origin of the parent’s parent, or a biblical name. Here the symbolic resource is used to constitute a link between the child and these ancestors, or, for the parents, to assert and maintain such a link — the symbolic resource binds groups diachronically.

The symbolic resource can also be used for its own content. A couple that chose a name referring to a song shared in open-air festival where they used to go together, considered the name also for the lyrics of that song. The song indeed narrates the relationship between a father and his baby-daughter. This content might be seen as having echoed quite directly some of the concerns of the parents-to-be; it might have contained hopes and desires, and re-presented them to the parents. Choosing a name designating such ideas has as an effect to turn such wishes into a project. Hence, the *enabling* function of a symbolic resource: as others semiotic means, it shapes the future, and “binds” indeterminacy (Valsiner, 2003).

So far we have create a time-line; having to reach a certain goal, people use symbolic resources that connect them to the past out of which they extract names that constitute a repertoire having a function of a foggy field of possibilities, or a symbolic crib for the child to come. The symbolic crib is full of feelings and memories fixed by the symbolic resources. And as suggested, their contents might also indicate projects.

#### 4. BECOMING SOCIAL & CREATING FUTURES

A fourth step consists in defining criteria to suppress first names within a given repertoire. The name intends to create a symbolic space for a child to come; it is a bridge between the parents' memories and fantasies, and the real world. Names thus have to be confronted to the others' perspective. The first other to be an audience for a possible name, is usually the other parent. In order to define criteria, couples use various resources as heuristics for decisions — making hit-parade of names, attributing points and means to each name of their lists, or mobilizing complex rules. Yet parents also try to adopt positions of generalized other, in the future; symbolic resources help them to define these others' possible perspectives. Some parents prepare fake birth announcement cards, or draw fake birth announcements adverts. On this basis, they adopt the position of an Other, in the future, to look back at these cards announcing the birth of that child. Other parents would adopt various future positions to imagine possible social confrontations: how the child might spell his name at school, how other children might react, or whether that name might become the name of a new washing product, or a new serial hero; some would, for this, consult various journal articles, or read the years more frequent names, or sociological survey of names. These uses of symbolic resources lead to an imaginary self-relocations, in the positions of internalized others, or as oneself in the future (Hermans & Kempens, 1993; Benson, 2001; Gillespie 2004). These explorations bring to reduce the possibilities for the name for their child.

Additionally, parents might realize that the symbolic resources linked to some names comport a project, a program for action. For example, an atheist woman called her child after a biblical name; she decided to learn to make a Christmas crib in order to teach Christmas to her child. The symbolic element, the Bible, points to a future child and a project for the mother: she has to become competent about that symbolic element, that is, become familiar with the Bible and acquire crib-making skills. In other words, the project designated by that name implies a relocation of the mother — learning, and therefore, a project of identity-transformation (Perret-Clermont et al., 2003).

These activities and thinking games oriented towards the social and the future, mediated by the others and shaped by symbolic resources do thus more than achieving the goal of finding a name. They have another important unintended consequence: they allow parents to generate two types of future representations. First, through these various positions and expectations, they shape a representation of the child. Second, through the use of symbolic resources, they shape projects of themselves as parents.

## 5. CRYSTALLISATION

The fifth step comes back to the initial question: given these repertoires, rules, memories, and expectations, how do parents choose a first name? Here, symbolic resources appear to be used to solve a highly complex task or enigma, by crystallizing many constraints.

Let us consider the example of a young woman, having left her French village to live with a Swiss man. Although religious, she and her husband refuse to give middle names — it would be the godfathers and they do not like the memories of these. The husband's surname's initial is a C, he is a plumber, and he has as a project for his child to become a plumber as well. He likes English-sounding names designating TV shows. The woman wants to have soft, rare, French names, which reflect her Christianity. She likes the name "William" but excluded it in order to avoid becoming the mother of a plumber's son who's initial are WC. Her repertoire is made of name like Benjamin, Mathieu, or Angeline and Gwendolyn. At the end, the problem is: how to conciliate the French-religious fantasies linked to the past of the mother, and the pragmatic projects of the father?

A name was chosen through the following series of event: the mother was watching TV with her husband, when appeared a character called Jean-Baptist — it made "tilt" to her, but since the name was "long", and given the fact that her husband doesn't like long names, she shortened the name into "Baptist". It appeared as ideal, as she explains: Baptist is the man who baptized the Christ in the river, the river has water, the water for plumber — all this makes sense.

Here, the Bible is used as a symbolic resource crystallizing complex sets of determinations: it offers images containing, symbolizing, linking and transforming otherwise conflicting contents. The mother's religious aspirations and her awareness of the father's project of transmission of plumbing, antithetic in the real world, are transposed in the biblical imaginary space. There is then a double movement: first, a deployment of a person's inner aspects unto its various aspects of the absorbing image — characters, configuration, landscapes; second, a step back, a distance to realize that this deployment, and with it, a resolution and transformation of tensions, took place (Benson, 1993). The first name that is "revealed" designates that whole process of crystallization and transformation. Such a use of symbolic resource is not intentional, but it is reflective.

We are now at the end of our prototypical sequence: a rupture having been perceived, people fixed a goal — finding a name — and created a foggy field of possibilities. This field is structured and précised through symbolic resources that have prolongations in people's memories and projects. The name designates the symbolic resource and what it crystallizes.

## 6. SYMBOLIC GENERATIVITY

Through the prototypical sense of creating newness in the rupture to parenthood, first names crystallize various levels of meaning linked to parents' thinking, feeling, and imagining. Names can thus been said to have four main symbolic functions, that can coexist (see also Tisseron, 1999, Peirce, 1878):

- 1) A first name *denotes* a certain social and cultural location; reflecting the parents' identity and positioning, it performs the child's identity;
- 2) A first name *designates* various representational fields — it points, fixes and maintains hopes, wishes, or real-life memories of memories of cultural experiences and the meaning and affects it had for the person;
- 3) A first name *actualizes* certain sensual experiences — it has a sound, taste, rhythm and form, which might provoke certain feelings or preverbal impression or memories;
- 4) A first name *indicates* a possible project for the child, that is, pre-forms possible developmental pathways for the child.

Finally, through a five-step sequence, we have observed people facing uncertainty engaging in a complex semiotic work, that bridges personal memories, hopes, the shared real world and possible futures. People pick up cultural elements, made out of organizations of semiotic units, carrying shared meanings, in their environments or personal cultures, and use them as symbolic resources. Examining uses of symbolic resources in ruptures and transitions brings thus a new perspective on the micro-genetic emergence of newness, at the intra-psychological level, within interpersonal relationship (Gillespie, this volume) or at the level of groups and communities (Cornish, this volume).

## REFERENCES

- Ammaniti, M., Candelori, C., Pola, M., Tambelli, R. (1999). *Maternité et grossesse*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Benson, C. (1993). *The Absorbed Self. Pragmatism, Psychology and Aesthetic Experience*. New York/London, etc: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Benson, C. (2001). *The Cultural Psychology of Self*. London: Routledge.
- Bruner, J.S. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bydlowski, M. & Candilis, D. (Eds.), (1998). *Psychopathologie périnatale*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. London: George Allen and Chumin.
- Duveen, G. (2001). Representations, identities, resistance. In K. Deaux & G. Philogene (Eds.), *Social Representations : Introductions and Explorations*. Oxford : Blackwell.
- Gillespie, A. (2004). *Returning surplus: Constructing the architecture of intersubjectivity*. Ph.D thesis, University of Cambridge.
- Hermans, H.J.M. & Kempen, H. J. G. (1993). *The Dialogical Self. Meaning as Movement*. San Diego, New York etc: Academic Press.
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1971). *L'Homme nu. Mythologiques 4*. Paris : Plon.
- Lewin, K. (1939). Field Theory and Experiment in Social Psychology: Concepts and Methods. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 44, 6, 868-896.
- Mazet, P. & Lebovici, S. (Eds), (1998). *Pédiatrie périnatale. Parents et bébés : du projet d'enfant au premier mois de la vie*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Moscovici, S. (1973). *La psychanalyse, son image, son public*. Paris: Puf.
- Moscovici, S. (1997). What is in a name ? In M. Chaib & B. Orfali (Eds.), *Social Representations and Communicative Process*. (pp. 12-28). Jönköping: Jönköping University Press.