

Life-creativity

Imagining one's life

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How people become unique persons is an ever-renewed puzzle for any observer of human life. Somehow, in the complex sets of social and cultural constraints that reduce margins of freedom, each person is actually the author of his or her life. Each trajectory is unique, and can be recognized by its specific melody (Zittoun *et al.*, 2013). This uniqueness, we propose, can be seen as resulting from *life-creativity*, the process of creating one's life-paths. To better understand it, we will first examine the relation between creativity and development, then propose to consider imagination as the heart of the creative process. We will treat imagination as a three-dimensional developmental process, and define the conditions under which it might be acknowledged as creativity. The case study of Rachel, going through her teenager years, will ground our proposition and further discussion. This exploration, we hope, will contribute to our understanding of the developmental aspects of creativity.

The development of life-creativity

Far from the myth of the lonely genius, a sociocultural approach to creativity invites us to see how people invent new solutions in the midst of the complexity of their lives, shared with others, in worlds of culture. Without recapitulating the classical debates within the studies of creativity, we will agree with Glăveanu and Gillespie (Chapter 1 in this volume) that:

Creativity thus emerges as a communicative, interactive and intersubjective process of negotiating differences within the tetradic relationship between self, other, object and sign (in their temporal expression) in order to successfully participate in a shared physical, social and symbolic world. Creativity means *acting on* self and world, on objects and signs, and manipulating them always in and through action and communication with others.

(p. 11, emphasis in original)

Sharing the genetic perspective adopted here, our proposition is to examine how creativity shapes people's life trajectories. More specifically, we wish to observe

the dynamic of life-creativity as people develop, and with it, the emergence of trajectories themselves.

Creativity and development

There have been various attempts, in mainstream psychology, to articulate creativity and development. According to a substantial review (Sawyer *et al.*, 2003), the domains of creativity and developmental psychology were disconnected until recently. In the 1970s, studies examined the specific creativity of children, its development, and its potential reduction or support in formal education (Sawyer, 2003, pp. 3–5). Later, studies measured how creativity correlates to personality profiles and other psychometric measures, hoping (in vain) to predict exceptional developmental outcomes. In the 1980s and onwards, studies started to examine the processes of creativity (Sawyer, 2003). These three tendencies, mainly based on correlational approaches, are still present. Another key developmental question is how creativity develops throughout life. It has been addressed by authors interested in the creativity of artists and creators, trying to understand its evolution and its causes (e.g., McAdams & Logan, 2006; Romaniuk & Romaniuk, 1981). Psycho-biographies of great men and women have also highlighted their creative component (Erikson, 1993a, 1993b). However, most studies of creativity in the life-course are non-developmental: they compare the creative capacities, or the outcomes of creative processes, at different ages. As such, they basically miss the core of a developmental science: the temporal, unfolding nature of living – the fact that time is irreversible, that organisms or psyche constantly change, and that they have to adjust to an environment itself constantly changing; in addition, that development is not additive, but is made of on-going dynamic reorganizations (Valsiner, 2000). Finally, most current studies on creativity tend to focus on exceptional creators rather than daily creativity (the so-called *big-C* rather than *little-c*, see also Glăveanu & Gillespie, Chapter 1 in this volume).

One of the reasons for the lack of interest regarding processes, rather than the outcomes, of creativity, and in particular ‘exceptional’ outcomes, might be the politicization of creativity research (Paletz & Murphy, 2008). On the one hand, countries attempt to enhance creativity in order to stimulate industrial and economical productivity (e.g. Cho, Chung, Choi, Seo, & Baek, 2013). Creativity has become a good, to be cultivated through educational means, which explains the explosion of creativity research in education or the workplace (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2010; Davies *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, this focus on how to increase creativity cannot be understood without a consideration of the value attributed to authorship in most post-modern societies (Hanchett Hanson, 2013).

Two aspects render the study of creativity difficult. First, there is a theoretical problem, illustrated by the contradictory results of studies examining the relationship between creativity and development, due to the divergent definitions and uses authors have of either notion (Paletz & Murphy, 2008; Sawyer *et al.*, 2003). Second, there is a normative aspect to the study of creativity: in most studies

creativity is seen as necessary good, yet authors often fail to make explicit what it is good for (yet the question of what is considered as creative and what value is attached to it in a given sociocultural context goes far beyond what could be approached in this paper; for a review, see Banaji, Burn, & Buckingham, 2010).

Taking into account these difficulties, we first will present the processes of creativity which we are interested in. Second, we will consider that if creativity has a certain social value, what others will say about the projects one has for the future, about the creative potential of the person, how life decisions should be taken, and so on, will be part of the creative process. Moreover, in Western societies, where individualism has been raised to the status of collective representation (Farr, 1991), the perceived novelty of the life-path chosen may be considered of uppermost importance to ensure the singularity of the subject.

Life-creativity as sociocultural process

A developmental perspective demands, first of all, the flow of time to be considered as irreversible (Valsiner, 2002). Actions can never be undone, and even non-action is a change; yet time passes. From a first-person psychological perspective, people experience duration, which has been described alternatively as infinitely short or on-going present (Bergson, 1938; James, 2007). Yet because people have semiotic capacity, they are constantly connecting past events with the upcoming present, or anticipating the ever-coming next moment on the basis of their past (Vygotsky, 1986). This proleptic capacity (Cole, 1996, 2007) is mainly supported and sustained by traces of past experiences which have become signs, thanks to the means offered by the sociocultural environment.

From this perspective, the semiotic function, the capacity of using signs, allows humans to take distance from experience (Vygotsky, 1986) – from *experiencing* to holding in mind, or observing action, to complex forms of reasoning. Using signs results partly from personal experiences, where recurrent actions are progressively generalized, as well as from the semiotic organization of our environment – how people call things, but also how they choose clothing, arrange space and buildings. All these forms of human externalization call for interpretation – and doing so, we internalize, reconstruct, and transform in our bodies and mind what we experience. Conversely, our interpretations, based on our past trajectories, are unique, and potentially transform the environment (Valsiner, 1998, 2007). Most of us are facing the daily unpredictability of life. Whether one has to decide what to cook for dinner or where to go on holiday demands a moment of daydreaming (see also Tuomi-Gröhn, 2008). ‘Life-creativity’ can thus be defined as a way to create a life-path, a ‘possibility thinking,’ which demands “refusing to be stumped by circumstances but being imaginative in order to find a way around a problem” (Craft, 2000, pp. 3–4, quoted in Banaji *et al.*, 2010, p. 29). Life-creativity is thus the contrary of automatism, or constrained repetition. Like most forms of creativity, it demands leaving the safe shores of the here-and-now and the known to plunge in the unknown, consider options, or imagine possible ways. Finally, it

can be considered as “complex socio-cultural-psychological *process* that, through working with ‘culturally impregnated’ materials within an intersubjective space, leads to the generation of artefacts that are *evaluated* as new and significant by one or more persons or community at a given time” (Glăveanu, 2010, p. 87, our emphasis). Life-creativity differs from creativity, as it is connected to the definition of life-paths. We will first examine its core processes, and then its evaluation.

Imagination as a creative process

Vygotsky saw *imagination* as the psychological process at the heart of creativity (see also John-Steiner, Chapter 3 in this volume). Greatly read in the literature of his time, Vygotsky developed a conception of imagination as *expansion* of experience in the short scale of a daily life or the large scale of humankind. He saw creativity and imagination as two aspects of the same phenomenon:

It is precisely human creative activity that makes the human being a creature oriented toward the future, creating the future and thus altering his own present. *This creative activity, based on the ability of our brain to combine elements, is called imagination or fantasy in psychology. [. . .] But in actuality, imagination, as the basis of all creative activity, is an important component of absolutely all aspects of cultural life, enabling artistic, scientific, and technical creation alike.*

(Vygotsky, 2004, pp. 9–10, our emphasis)

This invites a closer examination of the process of imagination, little theorized in psychology (less than in philosophy, e.g. Dokic, 2008; Kind, 2005), although it opens an alternative route to creativity. Following Vygotsky, we will consider it here as the psychological process at the heart of creativity.

What is the creative process in life-creativity?

The temporal nature of our existence implies a constant mismatch between our understanding of the world and the way it is given to us – both evolving at their own pace. This mismatch, difference (Glăveanu & Gillespie, Chapter 1 in this volume), gap (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011), or disjunction (Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013) can be seen as what triggers imagination as well as creativity. The process of imagination then needs to be fed and supported. From within, it is supported by “needs and drives [that] trigger the working of the imagination” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 29). The materials used by imagination are taken from a person’s stock of experiences and memories and from surrounding available semiotic elements. Extracted and isolated, they may be dissociated from their complex background, yet it does not mean that they are turned into static and decontextualized units. Indeed, imagination is always imagination of an experience (Gendler, 2011; Lyons, 1986; Vendler, 1984) and therefore more than the simple mental manipulation of images: signs,

meanings, emotional valence, and other forms of cultural, social, historical, and psychological impregnations, will remain and can potentially be themselves the elements of experience that imagination will work on. The materials used will “move, change, live and die, and this dynamism guarantees that they will change under the influence of imagination” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 26). After their systematization, they can finally be crystallized in new ways. Altogether, imagination appears as exploration of possible alternatives – it is a loop away from the here and now, into other times, places and worlds, before coming back enriched to the here and now – an *expansion* of experience (see also Jovchelovitch, Chapter 6 in this volume; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013).

As a sociocultural and developmental process, imagination is also constrained. First, if imagination allows for dissociations and associations between elements to be drawn on multiple bases, permitting a never-exhausted creation of new ideas, it also entails that the limitations brought by their impregnations may hinder imagination, and that things such as social values and norms, psychological blocks, material restrictions, and so on, will not disappear during the process. Second, imagination has also the level of complexity and reasoning that the person is capable of; its development is closely related to the accumulation of experience (Vygotsky, 2004) and to concept formation (Vygotsky, 1931).

Within these constraints, we propose to see imagination as loops by which the person disconnects from the on-going flow of experience and explores an alternative or potential world. Imaginary loops can take various shapes and directions, which can be described as deployed along three dimensions, or in a three-dimensional space (Figure 5.1): (i) along a temporal dimension – we can imagine the past (both the one we experienced and the one we never knew) and/or imagine the future; (ii) more or less distanced from concrete situations – based on simple observations, or using highly elaborated (more abstract, differentiated, or generalized; Valsiner, 2007; Werner & Kaplan, 1963; Zittoun, 2006) notions or ideas; (iii) more or less distant from ‘reality’ – from simple considerations of concrete alternative to the elaboration of complex parallel imagined worlds. Finally, as a loop, it allows the person to come back to the ‘real’ starting points, yet changed by that imaginary episode. Imagination allows our self-promoted, and very often

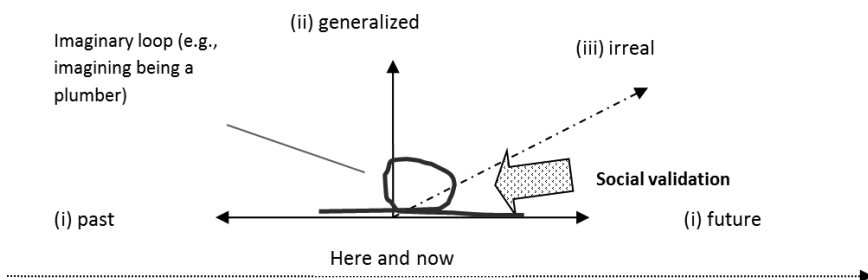


Figure 5.1 Life-creativity: imaginary loop and social evaluation

culturally guided, zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1931, 2004). As such, imagination can change our emotional experiences, our relationship to others, aspects of our identity or perception of others on us, possibilities of actions, and also, because of the processes involved, it can change our thinking capacities themselves (Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013; Zittoun, 2014).

What is the ‘product’ of life-creativity?

Defining imagination as the process that may lead to the creation of life-paths does not however entail that all work of imagination can be considered as creative. If imagination is *per se* necessarily changing the person, the idea of creativity implies a normative stance – an evaluation by self and others.

First, if what triggers the process of creative thinking is a need or a disjunction to be worked out, this starting point does not all of a sudden disappear when creative thinking begins. The ‘evaluation’ of the ideas produced can intervene at any point, and the work of imagination can in turn interrogate, modify, or delegitimize what initiated it, or simply surprise us and provide unexpected solutions to unexpected questions. In the case of life-creativity, trying for instance to decide on a career path can lead one to contemplate the idea of becoming a writer, to then decide that it might not be a realistic aim and therefore does not fulfil the objective of ‘having a career.’ In turn, one may realize that after all her desire is not to ‘have a career’ but to do a job that she might find fulfilling and meaningful. Identifying our most important desires and needs, beyond the social demand of choosing a vocational or educational orientation, and finding realizable ways to fulfil them is indeed part of what is at stake in life-creativity.

This observation points to a second feature of imagination essential to creativity: the possibility it gives to evaluate ideas by imaginatively exploring them, to not only produce alternatives but also to consider them in turn. Evaluation is indeed an important part of the process of creativity (Johnson-Laird, 2005), which implies that imagination is not a ‘disconnected from reality’ form of thought and that feedback from one’s material, psychological, social, historical, and cultural reality are necessary to the development of ‘objectives fulfilling’ ideas.

Third, creativity itself demands another evaluative dimension. Its normative aspect can be seen as related to the perspective of others on a person’s thoughts or actions (Glăveanu & Gillespie, Chapter 1 in this volume). Similarly to the fact that some artefact might be judged as ‘creative’ – often synonymous to ‘novel’ – by a person or a community having a certain perspective, life-creativity is actually dependent on the acknowledgement – or non-acknowledgement – of social others. Hence, one might wonder if the choice made by the person who engaged in a personally meaningful job – becoming a writer – rather than a ‘career,’ can be considered as creative, when it is judged negatively by all his relatives, friends, and community.

In other words, imagination, the process at the heart of life-creativity, might in itself bring in new perspectives. Having imagined what it would be to be a plumber

and excluding that option does actually change the person. The person's experience can be expanded through this imaginary exploration, even though there is no observable result of that exploration. However, when talking about life-creativity, one needs to consider the evaluation of others on actions or thoughts undertaken, in that particular historical and cultural moment.

Life-creativity in adolescence

Adolescence is classically seen as period of important changes in the life trajectory. Without reviewing here what is probably known by most readers, adolescence is usually considered as the psychosocial transformation of a person following, or accompanying, important physical changes due to puberty (Perret-Clermont, Pontecorvo, Resnick, Zittoun, & Burge, 2004; Steinberg, 2005). Adolescence can be defined as a period of many transitions, characterized by an opening and diversification of the young person's spheres of experience (Zittoun, 2012) – access to secondary school or vocational training, new leisure and friendships, etc. (Jackson, 1995). Adolescence brings the person to new responsibilities, and requires progressive emotional and social distancing from parents. It is a period during which the person might engage, concretely or on a more mental plane, in many try-and-fails (Erikson, 1959, 1968). Such explorations aim at defining or transforming her identity, knowledge, and capacities to act, feel, and move, and the sense and orientation she confers to her trajectory. If imagination is precisely the process by which such explorations take place, then it might play a key role in adolescence – and this is where we are looking for life-creativity.

Data: *Romans d'ados*

As the production of longitudinal data is difficult and costly, and many data sets are underexploited, we decided to use existing public material, which in addition allows grounding theoretical discussions (e.g., Gillespie, Cornish, Aveling, & Zittoun, 2008). The series of four documentary films called *Romans d'ados* (*Teens novels*) (Bakhti, 2010) follows seven teenagers in Switzerland, from their 11th to their 18th birthday. They are visited regularly by the crew in their families (minimally four times a year) and, when they agree, at school, in the work place, or with their friends. The edited film follows the parallel evolution of the seven youngsters, in 4 DVDs corresponding to one and half to two years each. A fifth DVD provides additional information (initial casting, family and young people's reactions after seeing the films). The film series was shown on national television in 2010, in national cinemas, and later in international festivals. In addition, the young people have participated in numerous TV shows and social events. Some can be found online and are treated as an additional data source.

These seven young people are four young girls and three young men and they all live in the same small town of a large, French-speaking region of Switzerland (26,000 inhabitants). No explicit background is given, but all adolescents are from

low to upper middle class; half of the families are divorced, and only one young man will go on to higher education, which corresponds to local repartitions.

A documentary is not raw data; it has been created by a film director with a scenario, an interview grid, and an editing project. In the beginning, each child is asked about who he or she is, about her interests, dreams, and projects. Later, the crew gives the young people a small camera to be used as diary. The film uses these rushes in parallel with interviews and visits to the young people's living spaces, and interviews with their families and sometimes their friends. Typical experiences they are asked about concern first romantic relationships, or first sexual experiences. The evolution of school or vocational projects is generally traced, and most of the young people's leisure activities as well as steps toward financial independence are shown. Finally, in the last period, each 18-year-old is shown rushes from the interview made when he or she was 12, and asked to comment on these. Because of these choices, and because of the young people's right to choose how much they show, we have unequal access to each young person's life. Also, in some cases the interviewer's questions appear, yet not in others. Hence the data is not as 'pure' as one could wish. However, the data is interesting for a developmental study because it is longitudinal, clearly situated in its sociocultural context, and based on a theoretically equivalent biographical section (Sato *et al.*, 2007).

Within this data, we have chosen to concentrate on the trajectory of one young woman, Rachel, to be treated as case study (Molenaar, 2004; Valsiner, 2007). While she deals with difficulties equivalent to those faced by others, she is particularly reflexive and quite open about her dreams and desires, which makes Rachel a 'good case'. The data was viewed many times by the two authors, and the analysis was built using atlas-ti and was also theoretically informed. We reconstructed the main line of Rachel's evolution; below we present sequences in which her main spheres of experience appear, as well as where imagination occurs; these are discussed in chronological order. The textual data is for the most part transcribed on the basis of the English subtitles of the DVDs 1, 2, and 3; divergent translations are added in [brackets]. Sequences of the casting (DVD 4) and online material are transcribed and translated by us.

Rachel aged 12: "The dreamer"

Rachel initially appears as a reflexive young girl, describing herself as a "dreamer" often lost in a world of her own – as her teachers and friends would let her know. Her projects are formulated as follows:

I'd like to become a journalist, a reporter, actually. I would like to go for adventures. And at the same time to be able to write, because I like it very much. [. . .] I like to write very much . . . Oh, I have a diary, I make up stories and I write poetry as well.

(Rachel, 11, DVD 4).

starts by comparing herself to the girl she was earlier, admitting how much she has changed.

Second, she has discovered what she calls the “world of bad boys” – she is dating a boy who frequently is arrested and put in a juvenile detention center:

I’ve started to take an interest in the world of bad boys. Sometimes it scares me a bit to be involved in that world. I’m scared of things I didn’t used to be scared of. I’m discovering a new world.

(Rachel, 14, DVD 2)

Yet this “world,” as adventurous as it might be, is not only an imaginary one. We will learn later that these “bad boys,” playing harsh and having a reputation in the local media, are often coming via migration from North Africa and the Balkans. Very soon, people start to worry about Rachel, and call her parents to tell them that their daughter “goes out with a delinquent.” (Rachel 14, DVD 2). Eventually, her parents asked her to “put an end to this story,” which led her to break up with the boy.

Rachel seems here to have reinvented herself by exploring a new sphere of experience and presenting herself in a more feminine way. These changes do not go unnoticed, especially by her mother, who views them negatively. She does not say much, yet, when Rachel is 18 her mother explains how she felt a rivalry with her daughter. For now, while her relation with her mother is becoming more tense, Rachel’s backing out is only temporary: she gets back together with her boyfriend, quite conscious of the social pressure she is under.

Third, Rachel chooses to bring the film crew to the cemetery, where her grandfather has recently been buried. Here she appears more serious and reflexive, explaining that the death of his grandfather was for her the end of her childhood. “When he died, I knew that part of my life was over, and that I’d grown more mature” (Rachel, 14, DVD 2). In that sense, this death appears as a rupture (see also Zittoun, 2007) – important enough for her to question her values:

I’ve always been very proud of my grandfather. I had a very special relationship with him even when I was little. I really have the impression that he taught us many things, and that it is thanks to him that I am as I am. And I was always impassioned by his culture, and his charisma, and his good mood. I constructed myself with his image, and I always have been really really proud of the relationship I had with him. I feared that when he would die the family would turn to dust. It is thanks to him that the family is so united, that’s his work. I think that that’s why he came on earth, I think it was in that role, because really . . . for me thanks to him family is sacred.

(Rachel, 14, DVD 2)

The grandfather appears as a person-resource, with whom she nourished an important relationship – he made her “who she is.” We might think that, through

such a visit to the cemetery, she maintains her dialogue with him (Josephs, 1998) and that he will remain an imaginary interlocutor for her.

A direct mobilization of these values appears when Rachel is 15, in a next occasion of rupture – the separation of her parents. Her step-father left their home after a violent crisis, which brought her mother to a state of desperation. Rachel worries for her and for her young sister in her company. The journalist then asks how she reacted, and she answers:

I thought about it. [I went into my room, I thought about it]. [I told myself that I would] take the matter into my hands. I didn't want my family to break up like this. I wanted to help my mother and my sister the best I could.

(Rachel, 15, DVD 2)

We first see Rachel's suspension of action, before a conscious decision making which seems to draw on the values attributed to the grandfather: the importance of family, and the need to maintain it united when it is at risk. Rachel seems thus to engage in a transition where, after exploring possibilities, she decides to take the role of the "responsible daughter."

Reporting these facts, Rachel also explains what was at stake for her: as her father left the house when she was two years old, "I felt as if I was losing my second father. In case of another divorce, I thought I could never trust a man again. And that my relationships with men were going to be very complicated." It thus seems that in her inner dialogue she had to explore imaginatively all the future consequences of the possible breakdown of her family: going back to the divorce of her parents in the past, now examining the present, she might learn not to trust men, and from this "lesson of life," in the future not trust men. Thanks to the happy ending of this crisis, Rachel does not have to develop such a life-philosophy. On the contrary, she learns something else:

It was hard but positive. It has shown us that not everything's perfect in the life of adults. . . . My mother was a good example: she worked a lot on herself, she was very brave. I find that reassuring for later. I'm entitled to make mistakes.

(Rachel, 15, DVD 2)

If Rachel's loops at 12 seemed detached from reality, this loop, at 15, is clearly drawing on past experiences – her father's leaving, the grandfather's values – projected upon the future – what would be a life where men can never be trusted – to the present, where it has real consequences (Figure 5.3). In the present, it changes her role in the family – now she is the strong one, in charge of preventing it from falling apart, comforting her mother and sister; for this, she has to find the right way – the words to say, the gestures to do – a learning in itself; and finally, it brings her some new understanding about life – one can, as her mother did, learn from one's mistake.

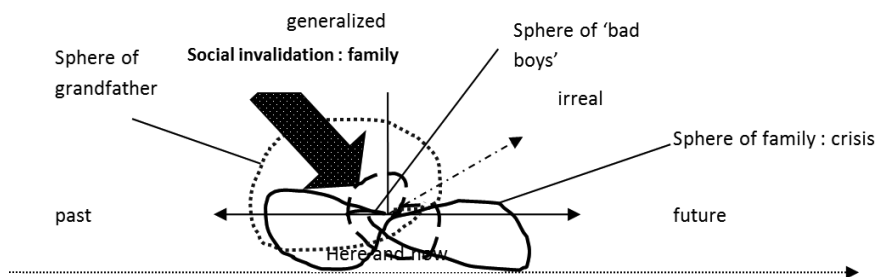


Figure 5.3 Imaginary loop, Rachel 15

This loop brings her to develop another part of her identity; beyond the young woman experiencing her femininity, making her mother uncomfortable, she also takes on the role of family cement, as her grandfather did. It is positively valued, and brings her closer to her mother. In the following years, we see Rachel moving back and forth between these two aspects of her identities, depending on the sphere of experience she is in. If abandoning her childish look for a more feminine one helped her to integrate a new sphere of experience – satisfying, maybe, the strong desire of discovery she expressed at 12 – such a change was obviously less welcome at home. Presenting herself as family cement may therefore be a way to solve the issue, while making of her an adult, identifying with her grandfather, and not a little girl identical to her mother.

Rachel, 15: Becoming a “disgrace”

Perhaps knowing that one can make mistakes, Rachel pursues her explorations in the sphere of “bad boys.” At 15, Rachel announces:

I . . . made love with a boy. A boy who . . . A bad boy. [And I think that] he told all his pals and they told all their pals. [. . .] They build the image of people, particularly the girls. You’re either a good girl or not. In this case, I’m not . . . I’m a disgrace [I am really a shameful girl]. They like what I do, but it’s a disgrace. I’m an easy lay. [. . .] My girlfriends said to me: “Rachel, [lower your eyes]. Always stick with us now. If one of the bad boys looks at you in the street, lower your eyes . . . [. . .] But I won’t lower my eyes. I’m not the type. I’ll try to get over it, but there’s lot of pressure.

(Rachel, 15, DVD 3)

To which she comments, in her reflexive way:

Being ready to make love with a boy shouldn’t have such heavy consequences [. . .] I didn’t think about the consequences it would have. Now I really regret it, it is true I should have thought about it, and it is a little bit my fault.

(Rachel, 15, DVD 3).

This time, Rachel “felt ready to make love with a boy” and engaged in a new experience. Making love at 15 was in itself a change from her previous affirmation when explaining her imagination of her first love: “I thought I’d do it at 18 or when getting married.” In itself, bringing a future project closer to the present should not be a problem. However, rather than a positive exploration, in this particular sphere of experience, the meaning of her first sexual experience becomes inversed, due to the gaze of the significant others – “the bad boys”.

As a result, this experience is turned into a rupture – the dreamy Rachel becomes a public “disgrace.” This calls for new sense making, for which she uses as resource what she has learned from her mother’s experience, the capacity to go through mistakes – “I’ll try to overcome it.” Hence, even in this bleak reality, Rachel is oriented towards the future.

Rachel, 16: No future . . . or still?

Aged 16, we see Rachel in two different spheres of experience, holding contrasting discourses. On the one hand, she appears working in a nursery, enjoying it very much and appreciating the children’s sense of humour. On the other hand, she comments on the sphere of womanhood in which she and her girlfriends live, which is fed by MTV’s images of “girls wiggling their bottom,” and constraining girls to focus on “appearing as fresh and as sexy as possible.” She also explains that this rough imagery brings girls to talk “like guys” – in a crude way about sex, as a mode of protection (Rachel, 16, DVD 3), and that this way of talking obviously is different from what her mother knew; she eventually also looks back at her recent first sexual experience: “I sometimes regret it, saying to myself that I’d like to be a virgin still. To have something to look forward to . . . that’s all” (Rachel 16, DVD 3). Rachel contradicts her former feeling of readiness; overwriting the sense she conferred on the situation in the past, she turns it into a non-mature act which annihilated her past imagination – that of waiting for the right man. One might say that the ‘crudity’ of her sphere of experiences shattered a much more romantic idea she might have had of what a first love might be – two spheres of experience fed with different symbolic resources, on one side the poetry and literature of a young girl, and on the other images from MTV. The result of this confrontation is the loss of “having something to look forward to.”

However, this is not where it ends. Still the same year, Rachel reports a trip to the Algerian desert. We are shown dream-like pictures of Rachel walking on the sand dunes, under a bright blue sky, covered from head to toes in a solar orange turban and djellabah, looking like an oriental princess. Here she comments:

I went to the Algerian desert in Djjanet. It was a shock at first, because it is very different from here. For me North Africa is the most beautiful region in the world. It was my dream to visit it. I discovered the Tuaregs. I was very impressed. I went to the desert with an Algerian guide. I discovered my grandfather behind this man’s traits. I’d never seen such a wise and intelligent

man since my grandfather. I followed him everywhere throughout the trip. It helped to keep up during the hikes. In the evening I told him stories near the fireside. I looked like a Tuareg because I was wearing a turban. I was with them all the time and I felt so at ease with him. It was the same for him. When I had to leave, we hugged and cried. We still call each other. I know for sure that I'll marry an Arab. I'm very drawn by the Muslim culture. I only go out with Muslims. I don't even try to, it just sort of happens. I know I'll get married the oriental way, when the time comes.

(Rachel, 16, DVD 3).

Although not much is said about this trip's organization, it can be seen as opening a new alternative sphere of experience because of the initial 'shock' it provoked (Schuetz, 1944). The trip is 'real,' yet seems fed with Rachel's past imagination of the future: that of a traveller – in the desert à la Saint-Exupery – and of a storyteller. She also draws on the figure of her grandfather to inhabit the guide and her relationship to him.

Altogether, this sphere of experience seems to operate as a restoration of Rachel's trajectory, reconnecting past, present, and future. First, where her closeness to "bad boys" was connoted negatively, she can now fully acknowledge her fascination for the Muslim world to which they were associated, with its positive values. Second, by making of her Algerian guide a character similar to her grandfather, she can connect the two worlds that make up her life: they are both governed by the values of 'wise and intelligent' men. She now can navigate more freely between them, where the values of one were previously not welcomed in the other. Moreover, whereas her recent past experiences seem to annihilate the future, this experience seems to plunge into her past imaginary life and connection to her grandfather, to open a new imagined future of a possible oriental marriage (Figure 5.4). Where her difficult experiences at 15 had left her with nothing to look forward to, the transformation of her interest in "bad boys" into one for the Muslim world opens up a future where she does not have to be "a disgrace" and can live the romantic story she had previously imagined. In that sense, this trip, as a loop in an alternative reality, really seems to bring a new richness in Rachel's life, who can reformulate her identity and confer a new sense to the situation.

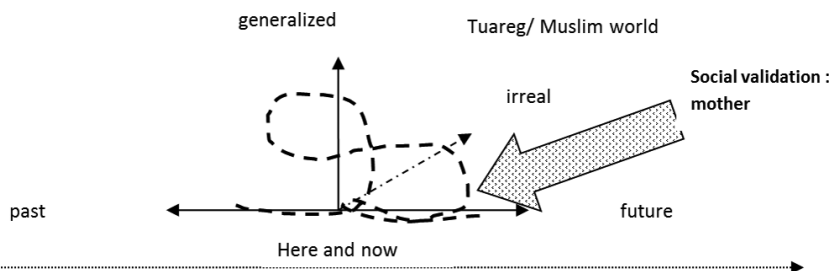


Figure 5.4 Imaginary loops, Rachel 16

The following year, Rachel engages in further retrospective examinations, acknowledging the difficulties of her previous years. Her mother prepares an oriental dinner for her 18th birthday, knowing her daughter's love for this universe, which her girlfriends attend. Hence, this Muslim/oriental sphere of experience, half real, half imaginary, is now acknowledged by the mother and friends and seen as possible enrichment of life. What used to be a problematic social universe for the mother – causing her to worry and ask her daughter to put an end to a relationship – has been turned into one that can be positively valued and thus included in the family sphere.

Synthesis

The case of Rachel can now be reread in more systematic terms, focusing on the evolution of her life-creativity. Aged 12, Rachel's imagination opens up a large diversity of alternative realities and possible futures, without implications, which seems to be tolerated by adults as childish. At 14, Rachel opens up new spheres of experience which, while being real, are inhabited with a strong emotional and imaginary intensity: the world of "bad boys" and "girls" – either seeming quite focused on the present moment, having an exploratory quality, but not much distance. Both will be negatively evaluated by the family. In contrast, the imaginary loop opened by the memory of the deceased grandfather displays more general values and, rooted in the past, points toward possible lives. This is then accentuated in the next years: her choice to have her first sexual experience confronts her with a very strong social invalidation. In parallel, the new sphere of experience, the trip to Algeria, allows remobilizing and threads together the world of the "bad boys," now generalized into Orient, and the world of her grandfather. Here, the imaginary loop gets more distance, and explicitly connects the past and possible futures. Rachel's subsequent interests both for traveling and "oriental culture" are now validated by her environment.

Hence, imaginary loops occur constantly and have different fates; although they are often dependent on each other, only some become active in guiding further life-paths. Here, we emphasize the double validation that turns imagination into life-creativity. In the case of Rachel, imagination seems to become life-creative when, on the one hand, she herself acknowledges them as such in her reflective loops, and, on the other hand, these are also accepted by her meaningful others in various spheres of experience. Holding her "bad boys" world, first against her parents' approval, only became creative – in the sense of opening new life-paths – after having been transformed under the internalized gaze of the grandfather, and accepted by her mother and friends.

To conclude: What we learn about life-creativity

In this chapter, we considered creativity as it applies to the generation of one's own life-trajectory. Life-creativity, we proposed, is imagination used in one's life,

to such extent that it is positively validated by self or others; thus, it can generate new life-paths.

Our goal in starting this exploration was to contribute to a developmental understanding of life-creativity. Using longitudinal analysis, we considered development in two mutually dependent aspects. On the one hand, we had a glimpse of how life-creativity itself develops – from a free and unbound imagination to, as people acquire a symbolic responsibility due to their transition to adulthood, a socially evaluated practice. Our case study also suggests a progressive transformation of imagination loops, described along a three-dimensional model, along time – progressively taking more distance, becoming more differentiated, and more integrated as they better articulate past and future, the imaginary and the real. Of course, how general this evolution is in the life course would have to be further enquired into. On the other hand, our exploration also suggests that development itself proceeds from people’s imagination, which opens possible and alternative spheres of experience and life-paths, expanding lived experience beyond actual constraints, but of which only some will be pursued in the socially shared reality, where, exposed to the others, they will become the person’s actual life-trajectory.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Jaakko Hilppö, Antti Rajala, Brady Wagoner, Alex Gillespie, and Vlad Petre Glăveanu for helpful feedback.

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