CHAPTER

# 23 Life-Course: A Socio-Cultural Perspective

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**Abstract**

This chapter characterizes a socio-cultural psychology of the life-course, and shows how it differs from other approaches of the life-course. General principles for such a psychology are highlighted, and a particular attention to ruptures, transitions, and the processes these involve, is proposed. Such a basic "grammar" enables us to highlight a few dynamics of development; empirical situations chosen along typical life-courses exemplify them. Issues to be further examined can thus be highlighted.

**Keywords:** development, socio-cultural perspectives, life-course, transitions, ruptures

> The possibility shadows every single person and changes the nature of his life; for (and this is another well-known axiom of existential mathematics) any new possibility that existence acquires, even the least likely, transforms everything about existence. (*Kundera*, 1996, p. 36)

The study of the life-course, an important issue in the social sciences and psychology since the 1970s, can also be considered as the effort to understand the mutual constitution of a developing person and her changing cultural environments. It is easy to admit that there is no human life outside of a culture—one can thus speak of the "cultural nature" of human development (López, Najafi, Rogoff, & Arauz, 2011; Rogoff, 2003) or of the "cultivation" of humans (Josephs & Valsiner, 2007)—yet *how* culture mediates development demands explanation. The current *Oxford Handbook* offers various ways of advancing such understanding; here, I propose to focus on the person's changes through his/her life-course.

## The Study of the Life–Course

Why does a person become who he/she is? Is it true that our fates have been sealed before we even speak (in a secret roll, in our genes, or in our social class)? Or on the contrary, can we "make ourselves" as we wish? What is our margin of freedom, how much can persons become who or what they want to be? The reflection on the nature of life-course finds multiple roots in old philosophical questions and has found beautiful forms in arts and literature. Life trajectories became the object of systematic scientific investigation relatively recently. In psychology and social sciences, reviews usually consider as first life-span studies these of Charlotte Bühler and Erik Erikson's analyses of biographies. In the 1950s, a certain number of longitudinal studies were published in the United States, and these gave a new grounding for the research on how people develop over a life (*see* Giele & Elder, 1998, for a review).

Currently, two disciplinary traditions have emerged and have been given contrasting appellations. On the one hand, the orientation in psychology that considers the development from infancy to old age and death calls itself *life-span psychology* (Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999; Overton, 2002). On the other hand, the sociological orientation that examines life trajectories considers itself as developing a *life-course* theoretical

perspective (Elders, 2004). Because these two fields of investigation develop in different disciplines, they have deepened different questions:

> Life-span psychologists typically begin with psychological functions and ask questions about change and stability, individual differences, and intraindividual plasticity. Life course sociologists typically begin with social change and ask how it influences communities and families, and, in turn, trajectories of development. For all their significant theoretical commonalities, the two perspectives often begin the research process by asking distinct types of questions.
>
> (*Shanahan & Porfelli*, 2002, p. 399)

### *Life-Span Psychology*

Since the 1990s, the life-span approach to development has made itself known thanks to its elegant propositions. First, it has proposed meta-theoretical principles according to which the role of natural growth and culture vary through life. From this perspective, the person's natural capacities and cultural mastery initially grow, until at some point of one's development, his/her biological capacities start to decline. At this point, culture plays a growing role in one's life. For example, when sight diminishes, one starts to use glasses; when one gets to the limits of his/her memory, online reference completes the amount of available information, and so forth. However, at some point, the biological state of person declines so much that culture cannot compensate it anymore. Second, life-span psychology proposes that development is regulated through *selection*, *optimization*, and *compensation* (SOC): people first select a certain number of skills, competencies, or relationships on which they will invest efforts; they then optimize these selected fields of activity; they finally compensate, in the limits given by the meta-theoretical model, their weaknesses by other means (Baltes, 1986; Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999). Studies in life-span psychology have particularly explored aging and old age, yet many other researchers over other periods of the life-course have been inspired by the model. However, the generality of these principles does not allow for a more fine-grained analysis of the processes of development nor the specific role of culture in these dynamics (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010). How can we describe the process enabled by culture, in what sense does cultural production participate to development, and in what respect is cultural mediation different in a 5-month-old than in a 90-year-old person?

### *Life-Course Sociology*

On their side, sociological approaches to the life-course have been struggling for accounting both for social and historical effects on personal trajectories and individual agency (*see* Mayer, 2009, for a review). Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Crosnoe (2004, pp. 11–14) have highlighted five paradigmatic principles in life-course theory:

1. The principle of life-span development: human development and aging are lifelong processes;
2. The principle of agency: individuals construct their own life-courses and the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance;
3. The principle of time and space: the life-courses of individuals are embedded and shaped by historical times and places they experience over their lifetimes;
4. The principle of timing: the developmental antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events, and behavioral patterns vary according to their timing in a person's life; and
5. The principle of linked lives: lives are lived interdependently and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships.

Mainly based on large samples over long periods, life-course studies have developed complex methodological strategies enabling combination of quantitative and qualitative data so as to show the interacting effects of context and biography, structure, and agency. They have tried to capture the commonalities of people born and developing under comparable socio-historical circumstances—for example, with the help of the notions of *cohort effect* "when historical change differentiates the lives of successive birth cohorts" and *period effect*, "when the impact of social change is relatively uniform across successive birth cohorts" (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2004, p. 9). However, it is not certain that people from a given cohort, in the same period, develop along the same line. Researchers have used the notions of *social pathways*, *trajectories*, *careers*, and *navigation* to describe the individual life-courses people trace within a given social and historical structure (Furlong, 2009). Scholars also

seem to agree on the importance of studying *transitions* within trajectories; they have acknowledged their role as *turning points*—events that "involve a substantial change in the direction of one's life, whether subjective or objective" (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson & Crosnoe, 2004 p. 8)—and have tried to capture their long-term consequences.

If we accept the five principles above and retain the importance of transitions in a life-course, how can we account for the processes whereby a person might decide the course of his/her life within a given sets of constraints and relations? How can we account for what is unexpected? And how is this connected to the cultural means at his/her disposal?

### *Using Traditions—Studying Transitions*

Research from the two traditions of life-course and lifespan studies have been published in separate journals, and researchers have presented their studies in different conferences and have developed their own research traditions. Only on rare occasions do they attempt to see their contributions as complementing each other (Levy, Ghisletta, Le Goff, Spini, & Widmer, 2005), then facing complex methodological as well as theoretical issues. These two traditions have also kept their distances toward the current developing field of cultural or socio-cultural psychology (and reciprocally)—even if their object is ultimately the same. Indeed, from a socio-cultural perspective, it is clear that it would be absurd to consider human development out of its cultural, social, and historical constraining and enabling conditions; yet for various reasons, socio-cultural psychology neither developed models enabling us to fully understand the nature of "cohort effects" over individual trajectories (but *see* Sato, Yasuda, Kido, Arakawa, Mizogushi, & Valsiner, 2007) nor gave much attention to the evolution of the biological constraints of development. In that respect, both lifespan and life-course studies might contribute to our enquiry. However, the core issue of socio-cultural psychology is to account for the life of humans as meaning-makers. Here, we first need to define the specificities of a socio-cultural approach to the study of the life-course, which is open both to the multilinearity of development and to the centrality of human meaning-making in their worlds of culture. We will thus propose a theoretical model for exploring the life-course, drawing on various studies of different traditions, using the notion of transition as transdisciplinary "analyzer" as proposed by Levy, Ghisletta, Le Goff, Spini, and Widmer (2005, p. 365).

### General Principles for a Socio-Cultural Perspective on the Life-Course

As much as there is life, there is change: things move, evolve, are constructed, become organized, decompose, and perish. Galaxies dilate and suns die; it rains, water evaporates; our bodies grow and become weaker; we inhale and exhale; the seasons pass. As humans, we perceive discourses and information, we think and dream, we communicate with others, and as William James (1892) wrote, our consciousness *flows*—it flows, as one might say it rains, or it snows. Human perception of these passing events, realized thanks to various social and cultural markers, produce *time*—as a personal sense, or as a collective history.

Cultural psychology tries to account for the experience of humans *in time* and *in social and cultural environments*. A person's birth takes place in a certain moment of history (of the group within he is born), and from that moment on, his/her life will unfold as times goes on. It also takes place in a family, with its beliefs, located in an area of the town, in a country that has current policies—that is, in a social, material, and symbolic environment. As the person develops, she will explore that sphere of experience, its boundaries, and explore other spheres. Finally, each of the others met by the person are changing him or her, the mutual relationships of persons, environments, societies, with their own rhythm and periodicities, produce the complex environment in which a person's life occurs. Hence, cultural psychology examines the ongoing *transactions* (Dewey & Bentley, 1946) or mutual adjustments between developing persons and their changing environments.

One of the specificities of human life, over other forms of organisms, is to be found in the central role of *meaning making* (Bruner, 1990). Young humans not only perceive their environment, they also feel it, develop memories and expectations. Their environments not only provide them with food and warmth but also with lullabies, rhymes, and fairytales. Children learn to read other people's intentions, and they make themselves understood; as they grow older, they learn to use and produce words, toys, colors, and ideas, to understand what occurs around them, to represent their ideas of the world, and to create alternative realities. On

the other hand, the experience of human groups is deposed and registered in concrete objects—a car is the result of many generations' experience of how to facilitate human locomotion—and in cultural elements primarily meant to carry meaning, such as chronicles, novels, psychological textbooks, and cartoons that convey, under a semiotic form, people's experience of life.

A core idea of cultural psychology is that each person, as one particular instantiation in time and space of the infinities of shape that can take humans, is absolutely unique. That person, exposed to the discourses, shapes, and rites of his/her environment, is likely to understand them in a sufficiently shared manner so as to remain in interactions with others; but these discourses, rites, or lullabies will also find a form of unique understanding, and translation, in her mind—where it will integrated with other traces of experiences, bring to psychological reorganizations, and so forth. Such process of *internalization* thus brings the person to develop his/her own "personal culture" (Valsiner, 1997). On this basis, he/she will also be able to communicate, make his-/herself understood, move, take specific postures, by which he/she *externalizes* (translates unto a semiotic form) what occurs in him/her, or within specific interactive dynamics (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003; Valsiner, 2000). Internalization and externalization can thus be seen as the core processes by which meaning can be produced, individually and collectively. Cultural psychology examines human development with a specific attention to the *dynamics of meaning-making* in which groups and individual are engaged.

With the help of other sciences, cultural psychology has developed a theoretical basis, notions, and models to account for human development, its transactions with environments, and dynamics of meaning-making (especially Boesch, 1991; Cole, 1996; Josephs & Valsiner, 2007; Valsiner 1997, 1998, 2007; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007; Wertsch, 1991).

### *Life-Course As Lifelong Development*

Stating that everything constantly changes is of course just a starting point. It is clear that change occurs only within a constant tension between continuity and change. Our bodies remain "the same" even if each of the cells of our organism is replaced every year. Paul can cut his hair, change jobs, and divorce, but he remains Paul—for himself and for his mother, and even for his ex-wife, even if she has fallen out of love. How can we account for the fact that we are both the same and not the same?

In psychology, there has been for many years a tendency to identify structures of personality, and types of character, as if these were acquired once for all—one believed that if Paul was an introvert he would remain so, or that if he had a low IQ he just had to live with it. Other parts of psychology have in contrast tried to account for how these structures have developed through time—what is the genesis of cognitive structure (Piaget, 1967), how a person's identity matures over years (Erikson, 1959). Finally, recent approaches have proposed models that emphasize the mutability of humans—Paul is not a father and a plumber, he is *doing* the father or positioning himself as a father in a specific sequence of dialogue with his son's teacher, which vanishes as he is doing the soccer fan with his friends 2 hours later (Harré & Davies. 1990). Similar debates have been legion in life-course studies: Is it true that a child's fate is defined by the first 3 years of his/her life (e.g., by the attachment style developed, or by the mode of resolution of his oedipal conflict?), or by the profession, income, and numbers of books read—that is, social class—of his/her parents?

Whether we change or remain the same through time, whether we are constrained by the hazards of our birth or whether we can develop in any direction, is a recurring question in human history. It has been treated as a philosophical question (about freedom and determinacy) and as a political issue (whether we are produced by our class, can emancipate, or can determine our own fate). As cultural psychologists, we can take a nuanced position.

#### TRANSITIVE AND INTRANSITIVE CHANGE

Drawing on dynamic system theory, cultural psychology can distinguish between *sorts of* change. In an open system, some changes are quasi-circular: people eat cakes, digest them, eliminate them, and eat again. Students read books, write notes, raise questions, check references, and borrow more books in the library. There is a "virtuous circle"; even if each book is different from the other, it remains a book that will be borrowed, read, and serve as a source of questions. Such changes are called *transitive*, in the sense that the circle is "symmetrical"—it can be considered from any point, and the other points will be found (this is what van Geert [2003] has called a "level 1 change"). Of course, transitive changes can also involve slight displacement and evolution—if Paul and Mary have the habits of swapping novels they have read and liked, then they are in an transitive movement; yet one day Paul can

propose to Mary not a book, but a DVD, which will also bring Mary to propose a Paul a DVD she liked (it can be distinguished from the former form of transitivity by being called a level 2 change: here, the structure remains the same even if some components vary). Other changes lead to total new forms of conduct or situation, from which there is no coming back: if Paul has an accident and loses a leg, then he will not recover it, and he will have to reorganize his life accordingly; if Paul goes to evening classes and gets a degree in law, then he will not "unlearn" what he as acquired, and this can also open new life possibilities. Such no-return changes can be called *intransitive* (or a level 3 change); these require real re-elaboration of one's understanding, means of actions, or relationship to the environment. From such a perspective, it is clear that these different sorts of change also have various degrees of freedom—transitive changes do not enable radical innovation, whereas intransitive require them. And, in turn, intransitive changes are sometimes imposed but can also be deliberately provoked.

Change occurs in continuous forms, as slow accumulation of reconfigurations of person–world–others dynamics, or through events that appear as caused by or causing discontinuities. Continuous change has been described as processes of maturation, growth, increase of expertise, and so and so forth, which have been privileged in the studies of child learning and development. Events bringing discontinuities specifically call for change. Studies on youth and adult life have mainly focused on these.

## RUPTURES AND TRANSITIONS

Not every change has durable consequences—this appears very clearly once we replace types of changes within a person's life trajectory. From that perspective, transitive changes are part of the daily transactions between the person and his/her environment, whereas intransitive changes are linked to more clear-cut changes that we can call *ruptures*. Ruptures are moments in which existing modes of progressive adjustment are interrupted. A rupture can result from internal factors or causes (as when Paul decided to leave his wife after a long period of doubt, or when he decided to take evening classes) or by external ones (as when he lost his leg); they can be expected by the person, as when a nursery child is anticipating and imagining his first day at primary school, or not (Winther-Lindqvist, 2009).

Ruptures are what life-course researchers call "turning points" or "critical moments" (*see* above). They usually constitute *bifurcation points* in a trajectory – some pathways are opened, others are closed, and generally their outcomes are not yet decided (unless the rupture is one's own death). Hence, Paul's new degree opens the possibility of working as a lawyer, but also of starting full-time studies again; his accident forbids him to play soccer but instead, after re-education, brings him to kayaking, which he always wanted to do.

The interesting thing is that ruptures experienced by a person demand substantial, intransitive changes—processes of adjustment, or adaptation, between him/her and his/her environment. It is these processes that we will call *transitions*. From a life-course perspective, then, ruptures followed by transitions are moments of accelerated or catalyzed changes. For researchers, they offer the opportunity to study substantial, observable development, and this probably explains the current popularity of studies on transitions.

In life-course research, the notion of transition has been used to designate moments of change either from the perspective of a person's life trajectory or from an observer's perspective. Adopting such second perspective, the studies on the "school-to-work transition," for example, examine the fact that groups of students end school and enter the labor market. Such a perspective has enabled researchers to distinguish "normative transitions," which are expected to be experienced by certain group of persons of a certain age in a given society, from non-normative transitions (Elder et al., 2004), which affects the way in which individuals perceive changes as ruptures or not. It is usually easier to engage in a transition in a normative way than non-normative, because one is more likely to find appropriate social support and acceptance: for example, when a young graduate applies for his first job, his lack of experience is likely to be tolerated as part of a "normal" school-to-work transition, whereas if Paul applies for a first job after his studies in middle life, he might be considered as too old for too little experience. Hence, the normative nature of a transition might facilitate the processes of change in which a person is engaged, whereas non-normative transitions might be experienced as stronger subjective ruptures. More generally, such studies highlight certain of the structure of constraints within which change takes place.

In contrast, when we focus on ruptures actually perceived as such by people, as we do when we focus on meaning-making, we observe that socially observable ruptures are not always felt as such (Zittoun, 2006a); also, people experience as ruptures and engage in transitions for events that are not visible for an observer (e.g., a grandmother died, a close friendship ended, or the person developed some new self-awareness).

### LIMITED PLASTICITY

From a socio-cultural perspective, we need to propose a model accounting for the ways in psychological change is enabled and constrained by biological and social situations.

On the one hand, it is clear that one cannot speak of meaning-making without considering the person's embodied existence. Any meaning-making is just one part of the ongoing processes of perceiving, moving in, understanding, acting in an environment that we constantly *experience*. In that sense, experience seems enabled and limited by our senses, the capacities of our bodies and minds—which are plastic to some extent only. However, these capacities are themselves mediated by our own meaning-making (we overhear advices that we do not like, or hormonal processes are modified by moods or achievements) and by our understanding of our social and cultural environment (that valorizes certain capacities rather than others, encourage us to develop other, and cure and replace further ones). For example, we can imagine that Paul developed a good memory as a consequence of his interest in soccer and his intention to be acknowledged as expert; this memory then helped him as he started his late studies, even if his bad hearing could have limited his participation to seminar discussion. Also, we can imagine that Paul is a rather handsome slim man and that his usual facility to charm people enabled him to develop a sense of self-confidence; hence, received for a job interview, he might have made a good impression in an environment that valorizes self-confidence and slimness. Hence, our bodies are important in sense-making as it is as embodied person that we experience ourselves, the world, and others, and through these bodies that we make sense of our experiences; also, it is as embodied beings that we are recognized by others and addressed and treated by our societies. Indeed, it is also clear that our societies, with the quality of the environment it creates, the modes of life it encourages, its industries and medical systems, shape the changes of our bodies, as other perceive us, and how we experience the world. It is thus important to emphasize that if it is clear that biology sets important constraints in human development and change (Baltes, 1987), then its action always already is in great part mediated, if not guided, by individual and collective semiotic dynamics.

On the other hand, human development is also canalized by social or cultural conditions. But what do we mean by that? The social is so much "everywhere" that talking about the "influence" of the social is as absurd as talking about the influence of "matter" on cells—cells are made out of matter, matter circulates through their inner and outer membranes, it is around them... More interesting, and more difficult, is to define ways of describing the multiples modalities through which the social and cultural becomes psychological and back.

Many authors have proposed such descriptions (*see* Valsiner & Van der Veer, 2000, for a review; Valsiner 1998, 2007; Zittoun, Valsiner, Vedeler, Salgado, Gonçalves, & Ferring, in press).

Here, building on the socio-cultural tradition, I will distinguish five modalities on a continuum through which the social and the person interact. First, the social and the cultural is already "in the mind" of each person. Since birth, each instant through interactions with the world, the person internalizes portions of discourses and signs that will participate to the development of his/her thinking and acting possibilities. This constitutes the mind—as always already social (*see* below). Second, every time a person interacts with another person, there is the construction of the social—as coordinated perspective, which is eventually designated by symbolic meaning exchanged (Gillespie, 2010). Third, every time a person interacts with or creates an artifact, the person is actually interacting with a symbolic object—an object that designates a world of shared meaning in a social group on the one side, and his own life on the other (Zittoun, 2005, 2010). Fourth, each sphere of experience in which people are located are socially structured and organized according to rules, which allocate them rights and mutual positions; it is supported and usually reinforced by material arrangements (it is often called a "social frame"). Hence, a school in a closed environment, such as a boarding school, creates a total institution that gives quite clear indications to people about what can be done, or not (Goffman, 1958). Fifth, the social and cultural is pervasive; present in the daily organization of the public and mediatic space; it

imposes, on the fringe of our consciousness, certain messages, values, and beliefs that constitute our belonging to a social world. For example, the smoking bans in most north European towns have created zones for smokers separated by a yellow line on the floor and glass boxes in airports, and they impose smokers to freeze in front of restaurants while their beer warms up inside, repeatingly making smokers feel unwanted, and non-smokers learn to see them as deviant (*see* Zittoun, Valsiner et al., in press).

Meanings move from one modality to the other. The meaning of the smoker–non-smoker segregation is that "smoking is bad," which eventually becomes internalized and guides the action of the not-yet-smokers who hesitate to buy a first pack of cigarettes. The issue of the smoking ban can also become an object of discussion between peers. The famous Marlboro poster is an artifact that now crystallizes these many meanings for a middle-aged viewer: the imaginary freedom associated with smoking, now overwritten by the fact that "Mr. Marlboro" had cancer, by the scandals of tobacco companies manipulating public opinion, and the present smoking ban. Interacting with the social and cultural around us, more or less reflectively, we constantly internalize and revise our earlier understanding and our systems of orientation. In turn, we can also externalize our opinions, make our friends change their views, produce discourse or art pieces that will be seen by others, and use various means to reshape our environment; we can smoke out of the smoker zone, move country, or, like in certain parts of Switzerland, use our democratic rights to show that the smoking ban is unconstitutional and suppress it.

#### MULTILINEARITY, UNPREDICTABILITY

Life is not a quiet river. It is a tortuous torrent, full of surprises. It can be characterized in two ways.

First, the development of a child or a person is not linear and therefore cannot be predicted. Our contemporary societies encourage people to travel, work or study abroad, or meet foreigners in their office or in their street; we are exposed to a wide variety of information about alternative life choices, other countries, and innovative professions; we live in a world that has lost its economical and ecological stability; we know that every other marriage will end up in a divorce; we are offered ways to alter our bodily appearance and physical strength; we hear stories of colleagues "turning green" or scientists abandoning their universities to live on sailing boats. At every step of our lives, social discourses, fictions, narratives, and gossips present us with alternative lives. Nourished by these semiotic means, but also by our own past, affective lives, and our imagination, we constantly explore the possible outcomes of situations, alternative choices, new versions of the past, or possible futures. Each moment, we engage in an action by closing down an alternative.

In addition, the world in which we live is not predictable, neither at an individual level nor at a collective one. Cohort- studies retrospectively show how a given generation went through comparable events—for example, very old people in Switzerland all experienced two World Wars, years of crises, and years of economical optimism (Lalive d'Epinay & Spini, 2008), yet how these events have affected each life is not predictable. Hence, if sociologists thought that in the 1960s (an until the mid-1980s) work trajectories were quite linear (e.g., a middle-class young worker would enter in a company, make his way through the hierarchy, and have a good retirement), then retrospective analysis have shown that unexpected events (such as an evolution of the market's needs), disturbed predictions, and personal crises brought people to have very personal trajectories, not so much depending on their social or economical background or initial training as on a synthesis of unexpected opportunities, luck in meeting others, accidents, random injustice, personal imagination, re-examination of one's situation, and moments of personal decisions (Goodwin & O'Connor, 2009). Hence, if life trajectories were never fully predictable (i.e., people always had accidents the day before graduation, fell in love with a person from a different social class, or experienced a war), then our contemporary society brings us to deal with a much more generalized uncertainty.

The second characteristic of life trajectory is their multilinearity: there is always more than one way to get to comparable points in the life-course. Studies classically have shown that children can start walking after crawling or might just stand up and walk (Bottos et al. 2008; Valsiner, 2000); one can become a lawyer studying straight after college or as a mature learner; one can have children early in life and then establish oneself as a professional, or one can acquire a professional stability and then have children; and one can learn the violin as an adult. This has two implications. First, not everyone develops skill A in the same spatio-temporal place

(e.g., in the classroom, third grade); very often, skill A is developed in other circumstances. Second, the so-called "learning disabilities" often more result from the fact that a person might be engaged in a pathway that does not enable him/her to change or develop that particular understanding or skill—an alternative way might enable the person to develop in such way that the disability is suppressed or avoided (Vygotsky, 1929).

Unpredictability and multilinearity always characterized human lives; only our current society constantly reminds us of multiple choices we have, the ambivalence in which we live (Sato, Fukuda, Hidaka, Kido, Nishida, & Akasaka, 2011), and the uncertainty that we have to tolerate in daily lives. Do we have more freedom, or are we more slave of our own fears?

### *Freedom in the Life-Course*

Life-courses depend on many personal choices, social forces, and random events; they are not predictable in a strict sense. Studies that have used mainly "objective" data (i.e., income, health assessment, and standardized tests of well-being) have tended to show, initially, the structuring effect of the social or the irresistible effect of biological constraints on human lives; this has then been debated by others who have wanted to confer some agency to actors (Furlong, 2009; Goodwin & O'Connor, 2009; Levy et al., 2005). However, if one considers that human lives are as much made by what is invisible (i.e., what people believe in, who matters to them, how they find the world meaningful or absurd, how the enjoy the sunset or an illegal copy of an alternative music band) than by what is visible (i.e., their income or their ability to run 100 meters) then the discussion takes another dimension.

Indeed, within and beyond the modalities of social constraints as defined above, people have various means to expand their life worlds. People engage not only in reasonable or practical activities, they are also constantly imagining—beyond considering *what is*, they engage in thinking *what if* (the distinction comes from Vaihinger, 1924; Josephs, Valsiner, & Surgan, 1999). Imagination—that is, thinking beyond the here and now—takes various directions: remembering, which is an imagination of the past, thinking alternatives in the present (I am sitting here at my desk, but *what if* I were now at the movies or walking the dog or visiting Tunisia), and anticipation, which is imagining the future. These imaginations can be minimal loops, as when I consider *what if* I would have another cup of coffee, or can imply major construction, as when *what if* I gathered the best scientists in the world and we would build a spaceship that could bring a country to the next liveable planet. Considering imagination, one can understand why very old people, with limited mobility and reduced social networks, still consider themselves as happy as years earlier (Lalive d'Epinay & Spini 2008) or how people in very hard detentions conditions could actually survive thanks to the powers of their mind—living in faith, exploring their past, or living alternative lives (Bouska & Pinerova, 2009). Such hypothesis is also needed to understand why, in all times of visible or invisible oppression, some people are taking the risk to object to absurd rules or engage in changing the society. Imagination is usually accompanied by a good dose of forgetting—forget that we are on Earth just for a minute and that our action will not change much (something that depressive people usually cannot forget anymore). Of course, some people might object that surviving in a situation of oppression thanks to a world of one's own or to minute degrees of freedom is still a form of alienation; but actually, who can say whose alienation is bigger, that of the bank director who plays golf, flies first class, and eats sushi (as it is expected) or the street cleaner who writes absurd novels after work?

The freedom of imagining is made possible through the mediation of signs, and so it intervenes at each of the modalities of our encounter with the social; we can imagine on our own, we imagine as we discuss with others, we enter in imaginary worlds when we read novels, and we can continue being surprised at our environment and remember how it was and how it could be. We are infinitely constrained by our social and cultural environment and yet very free from it. However, sometimes, it becomes harder to imagine, and this we have to account for. In what follows, I propose concentrating on two of the five modalities of the social and cultural as part of our lives: how we encounter it in our immediate environment, and how it is already in our mind, as part of our personal cultures, constituting a system of orientation.

## A Sketch of a Theory of Transitions in the Life-Course

### *The Plurality of Spheres of Experiences in Contemporary World*

In our complex worlds, we participate in various social and material settings, which are structured by

certain rules and organized through specific webs of meaning, that participate to the allocation of mutual social positions and define ranges of possible, encouraged, or forbidden actions. Typically, a child participates in family life, classroom interactions, playground during school time, family life, and perhaps going to football rehearsals, visiting his cousins, or gaming on the Playstation®. Each of these settings creates, for the person, a specific *sphere of experience*. These spheres of experiences, partly defined by the environment (as affording certain actions and thoughts rather than others) and by the person, have been described in different traditions (as social frames, microsystems, community of practices, symbolic contexts, etc.) that metaphorically consider that each sphere is "bounded" (socially and/or personally perceived as different from another one).

Ruptures, as what generate transitions processes, sometimes are caused by the passage of one person from one sphere of experience to another one; sometimes ruptures occur within a given sphere of experience; and sometimes what causes them is more general (e.g., a war) and therefore might be experienced in parallel in different spheres of experiences.

There has been abundant research on various forms of transitions *between spheres of experiences* (these are often perceived as problematic and are socially more visible). Authors sometimes distinguish vertical transitions, which suppose a development through time (such as the passage from primary school to secondary school for children, which is actually an intransitive change), from horizontal transitions, the daily passage from home to school, and back (which is a transitive change). Given our observations above, we will not call the daily passage from home to school and back a transition, although the question of how a person manages these passages (sometimes thematized as boundary crossing) is a relevant question from a life-course perspective. In effect, it raises the question of transfer of knowledge or, rather, moments in which a skill typical for one sphere of experience, a way to present oneself, can be used in another sphere of experience—what we have called *boundary crossing events* (Grossen, Zittoun, & Ros, 2012).

### *The Mind As a Meaning System*

What is it of the self that remains self while changing? In the dynamic perspective outlined above, we need a working model in which even what is perceived as having some stability is dynamic. If the person is essentially a meaning-maker and grows and develops through culture, then the mind has to be described as a semiotic system, producing sense about real and possible worlds. In psychology, various models are based on similar premises. The model of the psyche promoted by Freud precisely describes how streams of thought transit through layers of consciousness and undergo various semiotic transformations, under the constraining forces of internalized cultural rules on the one side and biological needs and strives on the other (*see* Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011). The "dialogical self model" represents dynamics taking place between various I-positions, resulting from internalized positions developed in specific social situations, within the "imaginal landscape of the self" (Hermans & Kempens, 1993). Here, we follow the idea that as humans develop in cultural world and internalize signs under some form of translation, these become progressively organized, differentiated, and hierarchized (Valsiner, 1998, 2007; Werner & Kaplan, 1963). We learn to identify some experiences as "sweet" and "likeable"; we organize them in classes of experiences, which we then prefer or avoid; our general beliefs (i.e., that people are good) guide each of our actions—for example, trusting unknown persons, and so on.

Some of our experiences get organized and classified into formal categories, which are usually called "concepts" and are the basis of scientific reasoning—hence, from that perspective, we say that what a dog, a cat, and a mouse have in common is that they are mammals. However, we also have other, more experience-based modes of organizing experiences: one might also say that a mouse, a cat, and a dog have in common the fact that they live at my grandmother's or that they run after each other in some cartoons. Developmental psychology has usually considered such grouping of experience as preconceptual (Nelson, 2007; Vygotsky, 1934), as a step to acquire the mode of organization of experience required by our society (and schooling system). It is also typically the mode of organizing experience observed by psychologists studying the modes of memory of various indigenous groups that had no formal education (Cole, 1997). However, such more intuitive, affective-based organization of experience remains active and can easily be convoked in daily lives (Zittoun, 2010); their logic is not conceptual, but affective, based on personal relevance.

Preferred associations between components of experience can be said to be grouped in *semiotic sets*, often in prereflective ways; hence, a person can think herself to be a "decent woman," because she does not go out with foreigners, she has good cooking skills, and she expects a decent man to marry her (Zittoun, Avelling, Cornish, & Gillespie, 2011). Such semiotic sets are partly organized according to one's experience and partly caused by the internalization of shared values or social representations. They constrain one's actions and feeling about one's actions; they can be reshaped through experience (self-reflection, or psychotherapy, *see* Zittoun, Valsiner et al., in preparation) and they slowly evolve. They also can be the object of progressive distantiations and reorganizations.

Progressively, certain zones of one's personal culture acquire some stability because they are recurrent, efficient, and enable a good enough understanding of one's environment. People hence define their version of a "system of orientation"—a sort of meaning-producing system that renders the world intelligible and actionable, made out of semiotic sets and concepts (Zittoun, 2006a). A system or orientation is produced through progressive distantiation from experience, its differentiation in more or less formal classes (semiotic sets, categories, scientific concepts) and progressive distantiation. Distantiation enables us, on a first dimension, to transform more concrete, specific, embodied experience into abstract and more general values and to have the latter to guide and channel concrete experiences. Of course, these can be more or less mutually adjusted: it is quite often the case that young people have certain values of being "good students," which is contradicted by poor school results, for example, or that they decide to become "non-violent vegetarians" yet find difficult to refuse a nice steak. On what can be seen as second dimension, distantiation enables us to organize experiences along what people feel to be a time perspective—some experiences are connected to earlier ones, others are felt as oriented toward future—although it is clear that any new experiences bring a reorganization of past experiences. However, in parallel to these processes of differentiation, hierarchization, and time orientation, other links organize traces of experiences according to logics of affective or subjective similarity. Such affective logic enters in dynamics of free association, can connote different zones of experience, and superimpose a different temporality to one's time perspective (Green, 2000; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011). Hence, the same experience of meeting a deer in the fields can on the one side feed my experience of wild animals, my knowledge about deer inhabiting this countryside, and complete my personal narrative; in parallel, it might enter in more floating and much less conscious fantasies about wildlife, entrapment, or cannibalism.[1]

Examining daily reasoning as a socially situated practice, the facility with which some signs are made socially available, internalized, and acquired a power to reorganize a person's life is at times striking. For example, it is very easy for a teachers' committee to jointly consider that a series of disconnected actions of a little girl actually belong to the same semiotic set conventionally designated as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Hjörne & Säljö, 2004). In turn, offering a girl to be treated as ADHD might be extremely convenient for her, as it brings adults to be more tolerant of her actions; this might bring her to more or less deliberately act as-if she were an ADHD child (Abbey & Valsiner, 2003). Such processes might durably shape the life-course of a person. Such analyses also suggest that it does not take much to attribute different values to one's experience and to reshape a life-course![2]

In summary, a person's view on the world is a randomly stabilized system of orientation, and bases for sense-making processes, resulting from the internalization of various socially situated and shared experiences, as well as from the responses her externalizations find in the world. Systems of orientation are the basis through which a person confers sense to his/her experience, which includes the affective valuation of experience, its semiotization, turning it into possible narratives, and the basis of development of more generalized beliefs and values guiding one's life.

The study of the life-course can thus be seen as the study of the slow evaluation and variation of people's systems of orientation, which are likely to require reorganization of semiotic sets or transformation along the two dimensions of distantiation and time. Of course, what the metaphorical notion of system of orientation designates cannot be studied directly; it can be only inferred on the basis of people's externalization. In what follows, I propose to examine of transitions in people's lives, as these offer occasions of changing and to elaborate new meanings.

### *Ruptures and Transitions*

Psychology, as well as many other developmental sciences, has been looking for moments of progressive evolution as well as of sudden change, called alternatively "irritations," "disequilibration," "turning points," "conflicts," and so forth (*see* Zittoun, 2009). Although there is something structurally comparable in all these developmental studies, it is important to see that what is considered as changing or being re-equilibrated or re-elaborated after a disrupting event depends on the theoretical perspective envisaged, the object of study, and the models used to represent its usual functioning.

In a psychology focused on the development of persons through the life-course, the object of study is the person. Because we consider persons as meaning-makers, we have to consider ruptures perceived as such (and not, for example, the reorganization of schemes involved as a child realized that a quantity of liquid remains the same even if it changes glass; Piaget, 1941). Hence, the notion of *transition* designates here the processes triggered by a rupture experienced by a person and that lead to a progressive, new adaptation between the person and his/her environment. (It is, of course, clear that the new "adjusted" situation still involves changes but only the smooth transactions of transitive changes.) But what is re-elaborated during transition dynamics? How can this adjustment be made?

At one level, it is the system of orientation of the person that has to be reconfigured. But this construct is extremely abstract, phenomenologically inaccurate, and difficult to operationalize. Actually, our system of orientation and semiotic sets appear to us in some forms of stabilized configuration, which people and social scientists identify under different labels in different contexts. Hence, identity (what a person thinks she is, or how others recognize her) is a stabilized or recurrent sets of beliefs and meaning about oneself. We can thus define a model that is closer to data and phenomenological experience—a midrange model (Zittoun, 2008). Research in development and the learning sciences have developed, through numerous studies, notions that enable us to capture some aspects of the person's changing activity after ruptures. Hence, at another level, grouping these analyses, we have proposed to consider that ruptures in the life-course lead to three mutually dependent lines of change: processes of *identity definition*, perception or positioning; processes of *learning* or definition of modes of understanding or acting; and processes of *sense-making*, linked to the valuation of the situation, working through affects, or the linking of a situation to one's own experience and in one's time perspective (Perret-Clermont & Zittoun, 2002; Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Psaltis, & Ivinson, 2003; Zittoun, 2005, 2006a).

*Learning processes* have been widely studied by researchers focusing on transitions between institutions, or from school to work (*see* below). Learning designates the acquisition of knowledge and skills, which are often identified through the fact that a person can actually solve a problem or handle a situation. *Identity processes*, including the elaboration of social identities, issues of positioning and recognition, or self-definition, have been the focus of studies of life changes, but also have more recently been included in studies in adult learning and learning in sensitive populations. Identity processes are engaged when a person is required to define who he/she is (in a job interview, in a questionnaire) or when he/she has to stand for what he/she believes he/she is (often because he/she is treated in a different manner). *Sense-making dynamics* have been approached through studies on narratives, biographical elaboration in the life-course, or representation of the future (Bruner, 1990; Dominicé, 2007; Mc Adams & Logan, 2006; Masdonati, 2007), but within transition and life-course research, rarely as an overarching process. In some studies, sense-making processes and learning, or identity and learning, are seen as mutually dependent. However, our proposition is that sense making, a direct production of what we have called a system of organization, plays a central role both in identity changes and in learning.

### *Uses of Resources in Transitions*

People experiencing ruptures in their life-course might use any available information or help to facilitate processes of transitions. Beyond the umbrella notion of "copying", it is possible to study what resources people find in themselves or in the environment and how they use them to facilitate these processes. Many of these resources play an important role in facilitating the process of imagination, enabling the consideration of alternative options, reconsidering personal narratives, or opening possible futures.

One important class of resources is *institutional*; many social settings are actually meant to facilitate transition processes in the life-course. Vocational trainings, birth preparation courses and groups of parents, alcoholic anonymous, and religious congregations are such settings, which might more or

less tolerate exploration and offer a safe space for try-and-fails, and support identity changes, sense-making or the question of skills. Then, people often activate *interpersonal relationships*, which might play an important role in offering a protected space to experience sharing, dialogue, mutual perspective-taking, and distantiation from experience, whether it is friendships or family or professional "transition-helpers" such as counsellors, priests, and psychologists. People also might look for, and more or less deliberately use *semiotic resources*—social knowledge, information, scientific knowledge, (including what can be more specifically called symbolic resources)—cultural elements that primarily demand an imaginary experience, such as films, novels, arts, and poems (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010; Zittoun, 2006a). Symbolic resources might play important roles of mediation of transition and processes, first because they support and guide affective imaginary experiences (isolated from daily constraints), and second, because their semiotic form provides people with means to contain, take distance from, and transform personal experiences. Finally, people might simply use their own reflective ability, and in a less mediated way draw on their past experiences to establish links between situations, take distance, and redefine problems—what we might call *personal resources*.

As a contribution to a life-course socio-cultural psychology, it is very fruitful to describe the processes whereby uses of various resources support transition processes (for such analysis, *see* Zittoun, 2006a, Zittoun, Cornish, Gillespie, & Aveling, 2008). As we will see in the examples below, it is possible to show how each resource used by a person facilitates (or not) playful exploration, and consequently, identity changes, the acquisition of knowledge, or sense-making processes and thus, the transformation of one's system of orientation.

### *Dynamics and Variations in the Life-Course*

The study of the life-course has to account for the complex interplay of social changes, the constraining role of culture, psychological development, and the margin of freedom of each person in given circumstances. Identifying spheres of experiences, ruptures, processes of transitions, resources used by persons, and the work of imagination, one might attempt to capture some of the dynamics of the life-course. Rendering visible such dynamics might be useful for the identification of further comparable processes, and it might also offer entry points for practitioners (teachers, parents, counsellors) who accompany people in different moments of transitions in the life-course.

The three types of changes—learning, identity and sense-making—are deeply related and mutually dependent. In most cases, changing one of these aspects will imply changes in one of the other aspects, in the shorter or longer term (*see* Fig. 23.1). For example, an adult that takes language classes (learning) might progressively feel more competent and, consequently, take more initiative in his/her workplace, where he/she might then be given new responsibilities, which changes his/her social and personal definition (identity); in turn, the person might then imagine new options for his/her life—for example, further studies or a professional change (sense).

From this follows that when a person who has experienced a rupture seems to resist one of these changes required by a new situation, the problem is often that one of the two other changes is impeded. For example, if after arrival in a new school, a formerly good student does not learn anymore (NO learning), it might be that he/she cannot tolerate the position of a newcomer he/she has in this new school (NO identity change); or perhaps the family of the young person plans to soon return to a foreign country where he/she would anyway take on the family company for which this knowledge is not required (NO sense).

Then, as noted above, each person participates to a plurality of spheres of experiences. It is very often the case that transition processes start in one of the spheres of experience only; yet these can extend beyond these boundaries, to others' spheres of experiences, which might then evolve at various speeds. The plurality of spheres of experiences has interacting effects, which can be stabilizing or destabilizing, facilitating transition processes or impeding them. A teenager finishing compulsory

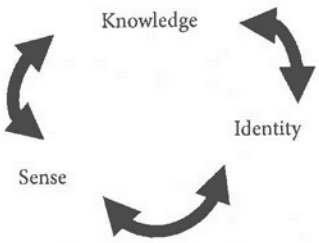


**Figure 23.1** Mutual dependency of dynamics of transition.

school might experience a rupture in his educational trajectory; yet he might, in parallel, still regularly attend his piano classes, his theatre activities, and his informal gathering with his friends. There is thus a transition in one sphere of experience but not in the others. However, the older person who enters in a pension might at once experience a rupture in the sphere of daily life but also put an end to her weekly meetings with neighbors, her attendance to church, and the monthly visit of her grandchildren; here, rupture diffuse in many spheres of experience and demand numerous transitions at once. In addition, this multiplicity is co-evolving. Often, key events in one's sphere of activity result from events in others—a professional transition might be caused, or facilitated, by a coincidental meeting with an uncle at a family dinner, or a person's ability to deal with the demands of a new job might be facilitated by his weekly discussions with childhood friends in a local pub.

In addition, each sphere of experience is socially structured and sets precise demands on people; consequently, for different reasons, the system of orientation of a person and, following from them, the sense a person is prone to confer to a situation, her ways of defining skills and identity, can at times be consonant, yet also extremely dissonant within a given sphere of experience. The experience of dissonant demands might thus be the cause of a felt rupture within a given sphere of experience. For example, religious young men who have developed a meaning system in a religious environment, which is extremely functional within that sphere of experience, might precisely feel that they do not have the means to deal with daily events once they are in a secular context, because their values and semiotic resources are dissonant there (Zittoun, 2006b).

It then seems that people can more easily engage these processes of change when they can work through one of these aspects at the time, leaning on at least another, more stable one. Hence, when a person changes country and sees her whole life questioned, having with her personal objects or pictures can offer a sense of personal continuity beyond the rupture, on the bases of which she can initiate other changes (e.g., learn the new language) (Habermas, 1996; Zittoun, 2006a). Similarly, in some cases, a person who is living through a rupture in one sphere of activity can, under some conditions, use resources coming from other past or present spheres of experiences to facilitate these transitions[3].

Finally, to generate change in any of these aspects, a person has to engage to some degree in exploration, try-and-fail, and approximations; it is by acting "as-if" one is qualified that one can have the experience of being treated as qualified; it is by accepting to be treated "as-if" one were ignorant that one can learn; and, most of all, it is by exploring possible explanation, narrative, moods, possible outcomes, and preferred lives that one can develop and confer sense to a situation. Hence, each of these processes demand the work of imagination, through which a zone is created for potential actions and thoughts not-yet possible. Very often, these explorations are rendered possible by the immediate social environment, which accepts a student's wrong answer, an adult's divorce, or a period of confusion in a young woman's life (Hviid & Zittoun, 2008).[4]

Many of the surprising curves and bends in a life-course simply result from the multiplicity of a person's spheres of experiences, their mutual dynamics, and the dynamics of transitions, and so these have to be studied if one wants to address life-course development.

## Current Issues in Life-Course Transitions

In this section, and based on the framework defined above, I use a series of empirical to highlight four inter-related issues that could be further analyzed in the study of the life-course.

First, the processes suggested here are meant to account for any transition, at any age, in the life-course, including very young children. Paying attention to such experiences of transition is a first step to develop a life-course analysis. Second, the principle of plurality of sphere of experience might help us to understand dynamics traditionally studied in isolation, such as the school-to-work transition. Third, the question of *what changes* as persons get older and accumulate experience through life has to be raised; and fourth, transitions of one person are likely to influence others, especially in intergenerational relationships. If the first two issues are currently being at the heart of a growing number of studies, the latter two are still to be explored.

### *Transitions to New Spheres of Experiences: Childhood*

Although the interest for the study of transitions in the life-course has mainly focused on youth and aging population, transitions as defined here obviously start very early, and birth is probably one of

the first substantial transitions a human person has to go through.[v] Without going that far, we will examine early childhood experiences. The passage from home to kindergarten, or from kindergarten to primary school—even if usually prepared by adults through different techniques—is lived by every child as a particular transition (Lam & Pollard, 2009) depending on his past experience, his preferences, his social insertion, and his ability to play with reality. Even if very young children do not have the capacities to develop long-term time perspectives, research documenting children's externalization have shown their ability to reflect on what happened to them and what might soon happen (even as young as 2 years old; Nelson, 2006). For example, Ditte Winther-Lindqvist (2009) followed two groups of children for 8 months, before the end of nursery school and after the entrance at primary school, and before and after their move from primary school to secondary school. Here, I report some of the observations of children age 5 years and analyze them with the notions proposed above.

James is a popular child in the nursery school. In that social frame, children are free to organize their time as they please, and the most valued activity by the boys is soccer. As James is very good at it, he is recognized as very competent by his peers and himself feels quite content. In contrast, Benjamin is friends with girls and is bad at soccer; the other children consider him incompetent, and he says he doesn't like them; he often withdraws, and seems bored when adults do not organize time for him; his main commitment is in adult-conducted activities. Before changing schools, both children construct anticipations of what might happen:

> James is sitting in the couch reading when Ollie asks him if he is coming outside to play soccer. "Yes, when I have finished reading this book," he says. I sit down next to him. It is a spelling-pointing book. He pronounces every word carefully as he points at it. Sometimes he asks me to read a word aloud if he is not certain. He sits a long time concentrating with the book. "I know my dad's telephone number," he says and recites it for me. "I am attending school next Friday," James says. "Only after the holidays," I correct him. "No we are to visit them next Friday and they will show us around and everything," he says with excitement. "That is why I rehearse reading," he says, as he puts the book away and joins his friends in the playground.
> (*Winther-Lindqvist*, 2009, pp. 134–135)

> Benjamin and Mark are drawing at the table with the adult Mia. All children are supposed to make a drawing for Liva as it is her birthday. Benjamin concentrates and works with commitment on the task.
> Mark: I am done (stands up).
> Mia: But Mark you only just arrived! When you start school you can't just quit when you feel like it... Draw some more....
> Mark: (grabs the pen and draws for 10 more seconds without sitting down) Now it is done!
> Mia: Mark, you know in school there is no such thing as not being bothered! (Sighs) Alright, this will have to do then.
> (*Winther-Lindqvist*, 2009, p. 134)

James seems to be positively anticipating school, and playing as-if he would be already at school. He is actively creating a zone of proximal development, with the help of a book, and his experience developed in another sphere of experience—knowing his father's phone number. Benjamin is not reported in such active explorations, even if he is part of interactions that signal him what is expected in the primary school.

After having changed school, things appear quite differently. James is put in a different class than his good friends. Soccer is not the main activity anymore and is even difficult to practice: it can be played only during breaks, yet the sport ground is far and always very busy. Eight weeks after the beginning of the school year, the researcher writes the following:

> (protocol notes from the school interview). James draws an unhappy face to the general question: How do you like school? And the class teacher asks him what it is about school he does not like. He shrugs and cannot tell her. "Is there something you miss from day care?" she asks him. "I miss my friends," he says. "But you have nice friends, also in school, don't you?" He shrugs. Regarding the questions about scholastic activities, James also says that lessons are boring, and learning rhymes and singing is dull.
> (*Winther-Lindqvist*, 2009, p. 138)

In contrast, Benjamin seems to do fine: "in school he is not supposed to decide for himself what to do with his time, an he is engaged in the project of learning and being a good student, recognized by all teachers and peers for his hard work with drawing, counting, writing letters, remembering rhymes and lyrics, putting his hand up when wanting to speak, etc." (Winther-Lindqvist, 2009, p. 138). He

still does not have many friends, but this fact seems to worry his teacher and his parents more than him, as he seems to enjoy schoolwork.

The examples enable Winther-Lindvist (2009) to highlight how, in different spheres of experience, children's "orientation" and social identity are welcome or not and lead to integration versus disintegration. In our terms, it seems that in the new school, James was relying on his good identity as a good soccer player, reinforced by his friends' acknowledgement and supported by the related skills; in the new sphere of experience, there is no occasion to practice these skills and to reactivate his friends' admiration so as to support his own identity. The expectations he had for school, through which things could have acquired a personal sense (e.g., reading and knowing telephone numbers), on the other hand, have not been met by reality: so far, children do "boring" things like rhymes and singing, which are much less grown up activities than writing phone numbers! Hence, the whole activity seems devoid of sense, which is suggested by the general emotional tone of James' externalizations (his unhappy face, his comments on missing friends and finding things boring). James has thus experienced the school change as rupture, and it seems that he could rely on none of the dimension identified above: identity is questioned, skills become redundant, and the sense degrades. In contrast, Benjamin was described as having had difficulties establishing a strong positive identity, and his skills enabled him to execute what was asked from him. The entrance in the primary school enables him to actualize such skills in an environment where it is valued, and where he becomes acknowledged as a good pupil; in turn, one might think that through this, and perhaps, through a genuine epistemic pleasure hence generated, Benjamin seems to confer some sense to school as a place to learn—manifested by his enthusiasm. Here, some pre-existing skills are reinforced and support an identity in the making. Hence, in the new sphere of experience, the processes of transition in which James engages seems to take an involutive shape, whereas it is more generative in the case of Benjamin.

In this example, we see the intricateness of learning, identity processes, and sense-making, ranging from affective connotation to anticipation of the future and evaluation of the adequacy of the situation, as these might take place at any moment of the life-course. We also see that such mutually dependent dynamics take place in specific spheres of experience, where relevant social others play an important role. Others acknowledge or not, validate or ignore, a child's externalization; this might facilitate or hinder the exploration or the change in which the child is engaged—his attempt to understand something he did not, his work of conferring sense to a situation, or of redefining himself.[vi] In addition, the role of these others might be guided by institutional rules: a kindergarten teacher can let children play, why a primary teacher has to bring them to read according to a certain agenda. Hence, to actually observe dynamics of transition, one has to consider not only the person's actions and externalizations but also how these enter in interpersonal dynamics, in a given socially defined setting.

### *Youth Transitions—Relationships Between Spheres of Experiences*

Typically, youth (including adolescence and what is at times called "emerging adulthood") is a period of many transitions; several changes of spheres of experience might occur in a short period, each of them creating experience of ruptures and subsequent readjustments. This partly results from the fact that young people often involve more time in the social world and in imaginary worlds than children do, through their leisure and because of training and economical reasons. For example, a study on secondary school students' uses of symbolic resources (SYRES) has shown that many young people spend, besides school and schoolwork, up to 20 hours a week in playing music, working out and combat sports, pocket bikes, art school, and in addition, during weekend, mixing to earn some money, or investing online. Each of the spheres of experience to which a person participates can involve processes of transitions. These spheres of experiences might be felt as more or less connected or disjointed, and young people might seem to experience a plurality of identities, might create boundary-crossing events between these spheres of experiences (Grossen, Zittoun, & Ros, 2012), or might reflect these in a rather unitary way. In the frame of this study, interviews were made with 20 young persons regarding their leisure time and their relationship to school knowledge (Zittoun, Padiglia, & Matthey, 2010). The data that follow comes from an interview with Marc, a young man engaged in vocational training. His interview enables us to show relationships between spheres of experiences.

In the sphere of school experience, Marc presents what is initially an involutive circle, because of

what he considers a lack of skills: "[School] is very demanding for me, I need to work a lot, I am dyslexic and things are very difficult for me. I never liked school... That is also why I trained as a carpenter". Dyslexia, a learning difficulty, is for Marc an identity, and it seems to limit his engagement in further learning. On this basis of such negative identity, Marc seems to have engaged in a negative choice, choosing to study the less demanding trade:

> I did a CFC [diploma] of carpenter [a few years ago] and (...) I worked 6 months in a company, and I didn't correspond to me at all, the work... It was not the act of working, it was the relation to the trade, the stress, and also the workshop chief was a bit lunatic, and as I was all the time with him it was too heavy. (...) Then I worked with another boss (...) someone I knew personally, a friend of the family. And there the atmosphere was nice, much nicer. But I wanted something else, to work alone in the workshop didn't correspond to me.

Marc seems unable to define a positive sense in a trade chosen as a consequence of negative self-definition. This experience led him to change his orientation. In the first company, Marc disliked the work and the other persons, which prevented him from developing a vocational identity—he felt as not "corresponding." Marc then changes place—that is, sets a relationship to examine "what if" would then happen, exploring ways to generate more sense. However, even in the new, supportive environment, the work still does not make sense, and Marc decides to go back to school to re-orient his professional pathway. Marc engages in a vocational bachelor after difficult entrance tests. Suddenly his relationship to learning changes, which surprises Marc himself:

> It is funny at the beginning of the school year, because French has always been the discipline that I don't link, because of dyslexia, spelling mistakes. It never worked for me. But coming here, surprisingly, my grades became very quickly quite good. And I don't have the same relationship with the discipline than in compulsory school.

The interviewer asks him about this sudden change, and Marc answers that he believes that the teacher played a role. First, the teacher often talks about things that are external to the course, and students feel that it increases their general knowledge. Second, French is taught in a different way: it is for the first time that the construction of a text is analyzed and discussed, and Marc discovers a new way to read and question a text. Marc realizes that he can read despite his dyslexia and that complex texts can make sense. He explains how, through his activities in the worker's union, he came to think again about the novel *Germinal*, by Zola, that had been read and analyzed at school. In other words, in the new school, Marc can engage in French learning, confer sense to it, and, possibly, change his identity into that of a competent student.

Contrasting with his school experiences, Marc is very assertive about his skills and identity in the sphere of musical activities:

> I started to play in a brass band [13 years ago], I started to play drums; after [3] years of training I could have the costume and of on parade, and soon this was not enough for me anymore, I went to the conservatory, I played a lot of drum, I made few years of xylophone which I had to stop because of the vocational training, and then I concentrated on percussion (..) and suddenly the director of the brass band left and I took it on. Now I play less, I direct, and I am still at the conservatory. (...) I compose pieces for concerts, I have a team of 114 young people, I have to teach them, manage the team, last week we were second at the [regional] competition with the percussion.

Music is a strong component of Marc's life; the members of his family play music and most of his friends were known through the band. Now, with the prize obtained, Marc feels also the public acknowledgment of his work. As musician, Marc's legitimacy is self-evident. Marc listens to a lot of music; he developed over the year his personal taste, he is actively exploring the musical field, attends concerts, and shares his interests with friends. Identity as musician and learning go hand-in-hand. In terms of personal sense, Marc is also aware of the way in which music is personally meaningful to him. On the one hand, music can be directly resonating with personal experiences. Hence, asked whether music he listened to could be related to his mood, Marc answers about his experience as adolescent using music to regulate his emotional state:

> Very much so. There was a period in my adolescence, during which I was... a bit in love with a girl and it didn't go, and it is true that I turned to music which were revolting or a bit hard. (..) it makes the energy go out. In general it easily calms me down. (...) There was also a song, where the text corresponded really to what I was living, and I listened a lot to it...

Playing has various other benefits:

> Playing enables me to cut from everything that is going on (...) when I play I don't think about what is going on anymore, it also enables to let the steam off, especially drums, sometime it hits hard, and now what I like is to be able to transmit to younger ones in the band. And this concourse... is also a bit (...) an acknowledgement.

Marc gives a narrative account of his changing relationship to music through time, and of the evolution of its use as symbolic resource. In the past, he used music for emotional regulation and to reflect about a love affair. In the present, music can be used to create intergenerational relationships in teaching; and played in public, it can produce social acknowledgement. Other people's recognition (students, the public, juries) comfort Marc in his competent musician identity. Sense follows: through these activities, one can also share his pleasure and expertise and enjoy the satisfaction of doing so. The transmitting activity becomes very important in Marc's present life. He enjoys it, and his comments show how seriously he reflects about the didactics of music in his ensemble:

> It is really interesting, the youngest is 10 years old. So, to teach them, is quite interesting. (..) I compose most pieces, it is easier for me because I can write according to their level, I can make voices which are progressive and not too difficult.

Hence, for Marc, in the musical field, an identity of musician, the learning it engages, and the sense that one can extract from it are mutually supportive and generative. That music makes personal sense supports engagement in learning, which supports social recognition, which supports identity and enables transformation of the sense one finds in it, until it changes the activity of learning, now oriented toward the development of teaching skills.

If we now consider Marc as a whole, we see that he developed in one sphere of experience an identity of incompetent learner, bringing inadequate learning and meaningless activity, whereas in another sphere of experience, learning, identity, and sense are united positively in music. The key point is that Marc, after his second work experience in the workplace, realized what was missing:

> I wanted to be able to transmit what I head learned, and there I thought that teacher of handcraft, this would be a good think, yes, to be able to transmit, and to be in contact with other persons. (Interviewer: as you were doing in the brass band?) Yes, that is what was missing on the professional plane.

Hence, it seems that Marc could connect his experiences in the sphere of school and in the sphere of music playing: having the identity, the skills, and the reasons to "transmit what one knows to younger ones" is something that can occur in both spheres of activity. It can be read as a specific semiotic set, crystallized enough to cross boundaries. Thanks to it, the identity of self-as-teacher comes to enrich the identity of self-as-learning-a-manual-trade; and the experience of being skilled in teaching, what is socially acknowledged, and the sense it has for self can now support the vocational sphere of experience.

Note that not all young people have to develop convergent understanding of different spheres of activity. Some young people develop parallel, but disjointed, skills in their spheres of music-mixing or Asian film watching and at school; others might in contrast have a clear unifying definition of their activity through different spheres, as Mara, who is interested in visual arts and uses every information provided by the school to develop her own exploration of arts, art books, and her practice of painting in an art school or in her daily life (Zittoun, Padigia & Matthey, 2010). There is still a tendency in psychology to claim what sort of life configuration is "better"—predictive of better social integration, or more well-being, and thus emphasizing the importance for people to elaborate more "integrated personalities" (Erikson, 1968), or on the contrary, more diversified, multifaceted self-definitions (Proulx & Chandler, 2009; Moshman, 2009). Given the open-ended nature of these processes, it is not possible to say whether some of these modes of joining or maintaining disjointed various spheres of experience is "good" or "not good" for facilitating development over time. One might even say that for some people, under some circumstances, some modalities might be better than others. Hence, for a young woman enrolled in the war effort, working in the fields with no possibilities to change activities, it might be good to have leisure experiences felt as very disconnected, such as Walt Disney film-watching, whereas at other moments, reading botanic books and literature about life in nature can serve as a symbolic resource that enriches daily practice (Zittoun, Cornish, Gillespie, & Aveling, 2008). In the state of our society, it might simply be good to find, when necessary, the psychological and social conditions permitting playfulness,

imagination and explorations of alternatives; these conditions are extremely variable.

### *Moving Through Life: Experience in Transitions*

As people advance through life, they also are likely to accumulate experience from transitions. Hence, if transitions lived by older persons might still be similar in kind with those experienced by young people, they might simply have known more of them and learned from them or about them. Personal experience is not the simple accumulation of distinct moments; it implies the constant re-elaboration of one's system of orientation. With it, not only do people have the ability to use more resources in new transitions, but also, the modalities of experiencing these transitions might be different.

In the following sequence taken from an essay called "November Hurricane," the Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal,[vii] age 75 years, describes how, seeing the crowds getting organized in Prague in November 1989, he reminisced about dramatic past experiences that occurred in November 1939 (on reminiscence in old age, *see* Coleman, 2005):

> So there I stood in front of the pub in my Russian fur hat, while all the people who'd been in Wenceslas square streamed past me, shouting and carrying placards – I watched them, astonished as this May Day parade on Eastern Monday, still without it customary whipping and lashings... I'd never seen so many beautiful unblinking people, I'd never seen such solemnity in young people... I walked along with them, and I came to my old Law Faculty, where across the bridge the white helmets gleamed and shone, proclaiming no entry—and I stood where fifty years ago I saw the Army and the SS-Waffe hounding my fellow-students out of the Faculty – it was morning, my friends from the University were forced at rifle butt into army trucks with green tarpaulins, while I stood on the corner of Bílkova and saw what I saw... And as the side-flaps were slammed shut, and those lorries set off, making for Sachsenhausen, I heard my fellow-students singing... *Kde domov můj*... our national anthem... Today I stood there and saw young men in jeans bending their knees and squatting down on a patch of lawn to light candles by a little memorial I'd never spotted before... (...) [where was a marble tablet in the memory of a young man fallen for freedom in 1945]
>
> (*Hrabal*, 1998, pp. 111–112)

In this passage, a present moment—linked to a dramatic transition in Czech's people's lives, the end of socialism in 1989, 75-year-old Hrabal as narrator sees the situation through the eyes of someone who has experienced similar events and their meanings —1939 and the transition of Czech people under the German occupation but also 1968 with the arrival of the Russian tanks leading to a totalitarian state. Hrabal's description of the past events, his fellow students' arrest, is already interpreted through the lenses of the present: in 1939, Hrabal did not know that they were sent to Sachsenhausen. The emotional intensity of that excerpt seems to be result from the fact that it is not a simple experience of a transition; it is vibrant of all the traces of comparable, past transitions, with their various meanings and longstanding consequences on the narrator's life and on that of a nation. In that sequence, then, these past events and the lessons learned by the narrator are also questioned and reread, for, if past November events lead to dramatic events, the present one, full of dignity, will actually see the "victory of the people," demanding a radical rereading of the past: hence past deaths, which seemed meaningless in the past, seem now to find a meaning in the new freedom acquired.

This active work of understanding, linking, and working through experience, takes place all through life, yet gets depth with experience (of course, in the case of a writer, the effect of experience goes hand-in-hand with the development of creative skills).

### *Intergenerational Relationships and Transitions*

Finally, it might be worth returning to the principle of inter-related lives; in effect, very often, how a person lives and experiences (or has experienced) transitions affects other persons living their own transitions. Intergenerational relationships affect, among others, nuclear families, teacher–students interactions, as well as grandparent–grandchild exchanges.

The fact that people's lives are inter-related has been largely shown by systemic psychotherapists. Trying to understand how interactions taking place with one or members of a family could have an effect on other members of a family beyond the therapeutic encounter, Dreier (2008) has proposed a complex ideographic study of a family, where not only a session with one or more members of the family are registered but also where the family members

are interviewed at home. Hence, the study enables us to see how, for a person, transitions in one sphere of life (e.g., therapy) are linked to changes in other spheres (e.g., family encounters); it also examines how transitions in the life of one person affects the lives of others and conversely, how the resistance to engage in developmental transitions hinders daily transactions in the other family members' lives. Such study enables us to advance in the understanding of the mutual relationships between transitions that are synchronic, affecting various persons, in and through various spheres of experiences.

A second type of mutualities are those affecting transitions lived in the past by an adult and the ones experienced by younger persons with which the adult interacts—that is, interacting with a child, the adult is in the position of the adult who was played by another person as he was in the position of the child. Such position exchange (Gillespie, 2011) and reactivation of old transitions can bring the adult either to simply exchange position (become the adult that once dealt with him) or, having the possibility to reflect on that situation, transform the situation. In either case, young people or children are confronted to some respect, to a re-actualization of a drama that already happened. Hence, psychologists call the "Pygmalion effect" the tendency of teachers to treat students as small themselves or modeling them in that direction (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968); and conversely, it is part of the hard work of teachers or parents to realize that their children or students are not the sorts of students or children they once used to be and that the transitions experienced by younger persons are different (*see*, for example, Hatchuel, 2007). This tendency to align present transitions with old ones in which one had a different position can typically be identified in the adult's constant complaint that "youth is not anymore what is used to be"—less well-educated, less politicized...To advance our understanding of such dynamics, in the study on secondary school students mentioned above, we interviewed teachers about their past transitions, and their modalities of uses of symbolic resources then, and we examine how, in classroom interactions, teachers tend to promote, in their students, the same sorts of uses of resources, and through that, a similar transition experience; we then compare this with the students' discourses on their transitions. This type of study can thus participate to a better understanding of the mutualities between transitions in people whose lives are inter-related.

Finally, studies on grandparenthood have suggested that although dynamic of experiences of reactivation of past transitions in the present of interactions with grandchildren, the different positioning gives occasion of creative re-invention. First, grandparents are not stressed with their children's troubles as they used to be as parents (Attias-Donfut & Segalen, 2007; Cesari Lusso, 2004); but second, intergenerational exchange allows for an explicit transmission of experience, with grandchildren being more likely to accept to learn from elders—especially, but not limited to, their grandparents—than from the generation of their parents. Today, as longevity increases, the co-existence of three to four generations becomes common in some families; at the same time, the drop of birth rates produces many elder persons without offspring. Researchers and policymakers have called for a "new intergenerational pact" so as to allow the establishment of new relations between generations (Fragnière, 2010)—within or across family lines. As traditions, which usually provided semiotic resources to guide most of life transitions, tend to erode, one might wonder whether such trans-generational transmission might bring the emergence of new forms of crystallized experience—that is, the embryo of traditions. In the future, such studies should pay attention to the role of mutually dependent transitions in intergenerational dynamics.

## Conclusion: Life-Course Dynamics

The study of the life-course is an old project in the social sciences. Given the research methods that have been privileged so far, wide groups meant to be representative of some universal beings have been considered; this has led researchers to focus on what is general among trajectories—either the impact of social and historical events affecting many people at once, or the biological necessities of aging. From a socio-cultural psychology perspective, the core issue is elsewhere: it is located where people render their experience significant—be it in the here-and-now of the emerging moment, or when 2 weeks or a whole life is examined at once. It seems reasonable to ground such a socio-cultural study around the study of transition, as this notion might facilitate trans-disciplinary synthesis.

In this chapter, I have retraced the main theoretical assumptions of a socio-cultural perspective on the life-course, and I have in particular proposed to focus on two of four aspects through which human "cultivation" occurs (Josephs & Valsiner, 2007): in

the constant evolution of one's system of orientation, and in the interactions that take place in various spheres of experiences. Using a deliberately limited number of processes, I have tried to highlight basic dynamics taking place as people experience transitions through their life-course as many occasions for development. In the last part of this chapter, I have also suggested some issues for systematic studies, such as the evolution of people's modalities of experiencing transitions and using resources to facilitate them, as they gain more life experiences, and the inter-relations of people's experiences transitions.

From what precedes, it becomes clear that to move toward the construction of a more general socio-cultural psychology of the life-course, less wide-samples studies are needed than well-thought case studies (or ideographic approaches). Beyond the strategies evoked here (quasi-ethnographic work, interviews, use of personal writings), there is a current scientific effort to rediscover and emphasize methods that would be adequate and to which the reader might refer (Abbey & Surgan, 2012; Toomela &Valsiner, 2010; Valsiner, Molenaar, Lyra, & Chaudhary, 2009). More generally, we can invite the reader to be creative—as long as data collection respects the basic theoretical principles exposed here (and by others) and preserves the unexpected dynamics of the life-course.

## Future Directions: Life-Course in the Twenty-First Century

The study of the life-course presents new challenges in contemporary times. The acceleration of time perceived by more and more humans—both resulting from actual technical, political, ecological changes, and to the information about these—changes the perceived stability of human life. More and more people become migrants or feel nomadic, and experience frequent transitions. In this moving environment, the strong social or cultural canalization becomes less visible—we live with the illusion of being free, when we are not. With less explicit cultural guidance, people would have to rely more on their personal system of orientation and on the resources they are able to find in themselves, with the help of others, or around them. Learning from experience is vital, and for those who, in rich societies, do not have to focus on daily survival, learning from experience involves mainly being able to reflect on one's experience and to develop strong basis of usable knowledge mobilizable in unexpected situations. This also requires an enhanced creativity—not only that which brings some of us to engage in a craft or an artistic creativity, but a daily ability to question the obvious, to explore the possible, and to see what is not yet the case.

A psychology of the life-course should give means to advance the understanding of humans in the contemporary world. I have attempted to highlight a few ideas toward that goal; yet this exploration also leaves us with open issues: How can the theoretical ambition to develop a psychology aware of the complexities of dynamics of the person in context really be translated in empirical work, and how can this empirical work be generalized? How can the notion of transition really become an "analyzer" by which advances in various sciences might contribute to such complex understanding? Then, how can a knowledge that emphasizes dynamic processes offer tools for teachers and practitioners? And more generally, how should we define human choice and responsibility in a changing world? How can our society, which educational institutions tend toward self-maintenance, facilitate the development of persons who are equipped to deal with unpredictability?

## Notes

1. Hence, three modes of organizing one's experience can be proposed: first, the organization of experience according to formal logic and that tends toward scientific knowledge; it involves causal reasoning and temporal succession, and it refuses contradiction. It is what we usually call "rational" thinking. A second mode, which we have here associated to the creation of semiotic sets, is experience-based and as such might engage reasonable, yet not rational, reasoning—what one might call "common sense" thinking (with all its positive and negative connotations!), which is highly sensitive to cultural variation and is typically displayed in narrative accounts of one's lives. The third mode is the logic of affective dynamics, which are much more embodied and ignore time and causality. We have very little control over it, yet it might infuse other modes of thinking, especially common sense. The first and third modes have been described by psychoanalysis, as resulting from conscious versus unconscious logics, secondary processes, and primary processes (Freud, 1898) or as "asymmetrical thinking" versus "symmetrical thinking" (Matte Blanco, 1998; Salvatore & Venuleo, 2010). The first mode is also privileged by learning and developmental psychology. The third mode has been explored by psychoanalysis but is still widely ignored by psychology, with the exception of some streams of social psychology (Moscovici, 2000). The second mode is the preferred object of study of social psychology and "folk psychology" (Bruner, 1990) yet has the less clear status of all. It is often seen as a combination of the two other modes of thinking (it is close to Freud's "preconscious" thinking, it demands a combination of symmetric and asymmetric thinking) but has still received very little attention in itself. However, it is quite likely that this mode of thinking groups a large number of identity dynamics, cultural experiences, and daily thinking, which participate in

what we call sense-making—and that is the object of study of cultural psychology.

2. It is to this sort of goal that some forms of meditative practice tend to orient people and reveal the random nature of the world in which we believe and, therefore, its vanity (in a Pascalian sense).

3. This raises the complex issue known under the idea of "transfer of knowledge" or of "use of resources" from one sphere of experience to another (*see* Zittoun, Valsiner et al., in press, for a discussion).

4. Such explorations take place in what Vygotsky had called a zone of proximal development (as it is created in children's play, or in adult–children interactions, *see* Van der veer & Valsiner, 1991) or as transitional phenomena in the sense given by Winnicott—between what is and what is yet to be (Helson, 2009; Winnicott, 1971).

5. It is not only a biological change but also and immediately a symbolic one: a child enters in the world of culture. All traditional cultures accompany birth with actions aiming at facilitating the cultural birth of the child, such as circumcision, baptism, or name-giving rituals. Humans, who are used to reasoning in terms of transitions, are pushed to question where these children were before being there. The question, "Where do children come from?" is a classical anthropological and religious question; raised by most children, it is quite likely to be present in many people's minds, even if in a very unconscious form. Parental theories (ethnotheories) about how to accompany the child's progressive mastery of biological functions (progressive sleeping hours, whining, sphincter control) can also be seen as actualization of implicit knowledge about transitions: people might act as if it were better to accompany self-generated transitive changes, eventually bringing more substantial changes (as when parents decide to follow the child's sleeping rhythm); on the contrary, they might privilege clear transitions by imposing a rupture to the infant and having the child adjust to it (as when parents decide to have their child learn to "make their hours"). Whether one believes in the importance of early experience or not, it is probably the case that these first handling of experience of ruptures in children might constitute a basis for further handling of ruptures and transitions. However, as humans are extremely plastic—especially in early age—and because of the multiplicity of experience and the multilinearity of development, it is quite likely that some experiences of demanding transitions might be compensated by later experiences, and memories of the one and the other revised accordingly.

6. The model of the semiotic prism, proposed elsewhere, enables to capture these dynamics of recognition in sense-making (e.g., Zittoun, 2006a).

7. The text of Hrabal belongs to a series of "letters to Dubenka"—although they are very written, they have the specificity of having the form of a freeflow of consciousness—with Hrabal (2008) explaining that his work consists in absorbing during the whole day experiences and situations, and emptying himself on the paper afterward; his work has been qualified as "total realism" (Naughton, 1998).

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