

PERHAPS IMAGINING A CHILD TO COME? COMMENTARY ON “MOTHERHOOD ALONG THREE GENERATIONS OF BRAZILIAN MOTHERS: WHAT HAS CHANGED?”

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Abstract

In this commentary of “*Motherhood along three generations of Brazilian mothers: what has changed?*” (see this present issue of JISS), I first highlight the qualities of the paper as attempt to capture various levels of temporality in a developmental perspective. However, the description proposed by the authors seems rather dystopian. Drawing on a research on naming practices, I suggest that an analysis that would account for different spheres of experience of these women, as well as their processes of imagination, might bring to alternative interpretations.

Keywords

Motherhood, imagination, naming, sociogenesis, life course, sphere of experience

COMMENTARY

In their article on motherhood, Chaves and Bastos (2013; see this present issue of *JISS*) do more than presenting an interesting and very alive story of three generations of mothers in a Brazilian family: through a case study, they offer a beautiful sociocultural study of the life course. In effect, theoretical reflections in sociocultural psychology, ideographic sciences, developmental sciences, and the study of lifespan and the life course, have now set series of guidelines which are both enabling theoretically sound and qualitatively relevant research, and very difficult to follow. This paper respects and illustrates, first, the basic idea of temporality in developmental psychology, too often ignored – and especially, the idea that ontogenesis (the development of the person), sociogenesis (the development of society) and microgenesis (here-and-now interactions) define, enable and constrain each other (Cole, 1997; Duveen, 1997; Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). Second, the paper renders life trajectories mutually comparable and analyzable, as these are aligned on theoretically equivalent bifurcations or ruptures met by various individuals (Sato & Valsiner, 2010; Sato, Yasuda, Kido, Arakawa, Mizogushi & Valsiner, 2007). Thus, third, this paper interestingly respects recently outlined principles of the study of the life span or life course¹, and especially, the principle of “linked lives”, according to which “lives are lived interdependently and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships” (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2004, pp. 11–14).

By following three generations of women, and their experiences linked to motherhood, we see how their courses of life take place on the background of a broader social and cultural evolution. Hence, women from the grandmother’s generation appear to have experienced motherhood as something talked about, welcomed and handled with expertise by a thick network of women; the middle aged generation also seems to see it as something to be proud about, still shared with women. In contrast, the women from the youngest generation are shown to experience pregnancy as a form of discomfort, over-discussed by a medical discourse, and technically handled by a world of specialists. The authors suggest that these changes reflect deeper societal transformations. Indeed, one might think that the medicalisation of life conception and birth, as well as new forms of urbanisation and demographic patterns, might have replaced deep family networks.

Paradoxically, if women seem to have gained social recognition over the last fifty years in occidental and emergent countries, the paper emphasises their loss of power regarding their access to motherhood. In effect, if we consider the two extreme generations presented by the authors, what do we read? The grandmother had a child in a rich network of women, who could speak about their experiences as mothers, and were able to transmit their know-how, acquired through generations and with peers – nurses, mothers, or aunts. Having a child was synonymous with entering in a new community of mothers: the transition to motherhood was facilitated by that network, which gave the

new mothers recognition, expertise and meaning. Two generations later, the woman in her twenties presented by the authors seems to have approached motherhood without such network. On the contrary, she has learned to fear that her young body would be damaged by the pregnancy, she has been forced to take classes about motherhood, and strongly encouraged to give birth through Caesar cut (apparently to avoid pain, but according to the authors, to enable doctors to earn more money); and finally she seems to have been hidden the realities and hardships of handling a young baby. Hence, in the life of the young woman, media and institutional information have taken the place of knowledge from experience, and the women's network seems replaced by a cold medical institutions. As a result, it seems that younger women have not more choice in child birth and childrearing practices than their grandmothers. Men might now be more involved, but it seems to have as effect to infantilize young women rather than contributing to establish more equal relationships between genders. Overall, lacking a supporting network, the youngest mother seems to have little resources to support the transition to the new identity of a mother, the actions it demands, and the existential meaning it might have. This description is rather worrying – in the extreme case, it reminds us of the painful situation of African migrant mothers in France, who sometimes collapse under the impression that their newborn is “senseless” due to the lack of human and symbolic network to channel the transition (Moro, 2001). Less dramatically, but going in the same direction than the analysis proposed here, in Switzerland young mothers tend to search and find semiotic and social resources through online women's networks and blogs rather than in their social environment (Wüthrich, 2011).

Such a reading would be fully consonant with a dystopian analysis of our society – a society of mechanisation of human relationships, individualization, and hypocritical submission of women and reproduction under the domination of a new generation of male technicians. However, a different focus on the trajectories of these women belonging to three generations could highlight other points, and bring to different hypothesis about the future.

First, over sixty years, it is not only social representations and values of motherhood that have changed; the daily conditions of living in a given society have as well. As women's life course is not only a history of motherhood: middle-class women, like people in general, are engaged in a various spheres of experience, in and out of home (Zittoun, 2012): they work, have hobbies, meet friends; they travel, read, watch movies and dance, etc. A life trajectory cannot be understood only from the perspective of one sphere of experience: a school drop-out can be a brilliant artist, a redundant professional can reorient his life according to his preferred hobby, a person might share a fulfilled life with friends and cultivate a rich inner life while living in the extreme conditions of war (Bouska & Pinerova, 2009; Zittoun, 2012). Hence, one might question what else has changed in the lives of these women over three generations. We read that they were all educated and working: but how much did they choose their work? How much were they

forced to be mainly mothers and housekeepers? What other spheres of experience could they engage in and develop? If we look at women's possibility of choosing and acting in various spheres of experience, would the analysis made in the sphere of childbirth also hold, and what would be the general emerging picture? Hence, my first comment is that the meaning of motherhood might need to be understood not in isolation, but as one aspect of a life trajectory going through, and combining diverse spheres of experience.

Second, these stories concentrate on how mother handle real actions (giving birth, breastfeeding, etc.). But what can we know about these women's imaginary lives? History has shown that major revolutions started with dreams. Also, endless testimonies show how much human lives is not only about deeds and action, and interpreting these, but also meaning making on an imaginary plane – where one does not only reflect on when to change a nappy, but much more broadly, where can put oneself in the shoes of someone else, imagine travelling through time and space, explore counter-realities, and so on (Zittoun, in press; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013). This dimension might be especially important in times of significant life-transitions, shared by humankind (birth, coming of age, death, etc.). As it is well known, most cultural traditions have developed collective rituals for accompanying these natural facts, and turn them into cultural events (Toren, 2006; van Gennep, 1981). All traditions' rituals involve parallel worlds, sacred times, the manipulation of symbols, and so on. These rituals give a symbolic, graspable form to the emotional resonance of life-changing events, render events intelligible, and establish a sense of continuity to the person, while shaping the history of the group. With modernisation and desacralisation, humans have not lost their need to symbolise affect and reassess continuity: they have changed means of doing so. These practices might have become more private and less visible – yet these haven't been lost.

A study of facts and deeds in humans always misses half of human lives. Also, it does not fully allow understanding major individual and social changes. At the turn of the millennium, for instance, I enquired about naming practices in the transition to parenthood (Zittoun, 2004, 2005). One of the starting points of that research was the extremely pessimistic discourse of sociologists and anthropologists at that time: people were said to have lost any sense of history and traditions, they were becoming senseless isolated individuals, etc. From such a perspective, it would certainly explain the observed changes in naming patterns in France and Switzerland: there where people used to name children after family members or godfathers, following familial, religious or group-specific rules of naming, people were now naming children after movies heroes, characters of songs, or footballers! Was this not the sign of an “influence” of media culture, which replaced “real” trans-generational culture and value-laden means, with media-based, shiny-but-empty, shallow discourses?

A close analysis of parents' narration of their naming practices, names imagined and dreamt about, elected and tried out, explored and invented, kept and rejected, showed something different. Through the process of imagining names, people were actually re-

exploring their relationships to family and friends, questioning their intergenerational ties, naming their fears, representing their hopes and desires. Non-traditional first names were not empty shells imposed by the media: they were complex symbolic creations, crystallizing webs of individual and shared meanings, memories and hopes for the futures, for their children's lives and for themselves (Zittoun, 2004, 2005).

From this perspective, a deficit reading of intergenerational change— it was better when families were tighter, when women's networks were stronger – appears to be only half of the story. When forms of life disappear, people explore alternative ones. And one very powerful exploration for change is the imaginary realm. Naming, like any other symbolic activity, thus becomes pregnant of potential individual and collective changes. As sociocultural psychologists, aware of the importance of meaning-making, we should be the first one to complete our analysis of life course and trajectories of what is happening, with a study of what people think might happen, could, or would have happened. For very often, changes to come first occur in the dream of possibilities.

To conclude, by comparing the experiences of motherhood of three generations of women in a family, in their evolving social and political environment, the authors give us a beautiful entry in the mutualities of development at different scales. However, research topics demand selections in the data and analytical decisions, which constrain what can be generalized. To understand the meaning of motherhood one does not need to know everything about a person; still, I suggest, experiences of motherhood could perhaps be better understood when considered as one part – but not the whole – of a woman's life; and when apprehended not only in their concrete aspects, but also as being accompanied by the work of imagination. Intergenerational changes could thus be understood not only in terms of losses, but also, in terms of emerging forms of life organisation.

Footnotes:

1. These five principles highlighted by Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Crosnoe (2004, pp. 11–14) are: 1) that human *development* and aging are lifelong processes; 2) that humans have *agency* although free choice is bounded by historical and social circumstance; 3) that life-courses of individuals are embedded and shaped by *historical times* and places; 4) that antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events, and behavioural patterns vary according to their *timing* in a person's life; and 5) the idea that lives are lived *interdependently*.

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