

# A socialcultural psychology of the life-course

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*It was a pleasure and honour to be invited to present my work at the British Psychological Society's Developmental Psychology Section and Social Psychology Section Annual Conference 2015, and I here thank the organisers for this kind invitation. I was particularly happy to intervene under this double auspice, as I believe that it is not only theoretically relevant to articulate developmental and social dynamics – I also believe that it is the only way we can address current human and societal challenges as psychologists. In this paper, which is very close to the lecture I gave, I first go back to the link between social and developmental psychology, before sketching a sociocultural approach of the life-course. I then argue that, in order to understand human specificities, we need not only to understand the many social spaces and places through which people move and act, but also, the places of memory, dreams and imagination through which they wander. I finally present two current research topics, before coming back to some implications of my propositions.*

## From the social psychology of development to cultural psychology

**A**S I YOUNG ACADEMIC, I was lucky enough to be trained by scholars who were both developmental and social psychologists such as Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont, in Neuchâtel, Gerard Duveen in Cambridge, who used the term 'social psychology of development' to characterise their work from the late 1970s to the 1990s, together with others in Switzerland, the UK and around Europe. Initially working from a Piagetian perspective, these authors soon realised that the social dimensions of the interactions in which children were located were as much part of the solution of a task, as cognition itself. These studies moved through a series of paradigms, in which the status of the social progressively changed; initially a variable, it became clear that the 'social' was actually the nature of the interaction between participants, or even, the definition of the situation as it unfolds; and the emphasis on what is learned moved from the pure task resolution, to the child's capacity to make sense to the demands of a complex situation (Durkin, 1995; Duveen, 1997; Grossen & Perret-Clermont, 1994; Hinde, Perret-Clermont & Hinde, 1985; Perret-Clermont & Carugati, 2001; Perret-Clermont, Perret & Bell, 1991; Psaltis, Duveen & Perret-Clermont, 2009; Schubauer-Leoni, Grossen & Perret-Clermont, 1992; Zittoun & Iannaccone, 2014).

In parallel, after the end of Communism, a new wind blew in European and American research with the diffusion of Lev Vygotsky's work, through the writings of Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 1990), Michael Cole (Cole, 1996) and Jaan Valsiner (Valsiner, 1987; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000; van der Veer & Valsiner, 1993). Vygotsky's 'first law of development', according to which every acquisition is first social, before being reconstructed on a psychological plane, as well as his emphasis on semiotic mediation, invited to a new understanding of development. First, the social is not a bias, not even a condition or a catalyst of development: it is what allows development, and its deep precondition; second, the social designates not only classes, or relations; it also encompasses the materiality, as well as the semiotic texture of a historically situated situation. Expanding the social to the sociocultural in broader sense, research progressively moved from studies in the lab to situated learning, in the workplace, at school, or in the hospital (Duveen, 2001; Grossen & Perret-Clermont, 1992; Grossen, Zittoun & Ros, 2012; Perret-Clermont, 1997, 2015; Perret-Clermont et al., 2004; Perret & Perret-Clermont,

2011; Psaltis, Gillespie & Perret-Clermont, 2015; Zittoun & Grossen, 2012). Also, it became clear that not only children, but also adolescents and adults do develop. This is where the project of a sociocultural psychology of the life-course comes in.

### **The project of sociocultural psychology and its challenges**

Inspired by Vygotsky's work together with other theoreticians, a broader scientific community has developed in Europe and across the world since the 1990s, studying 'sociocultural' or 'cultural' psychology. Sociocultural psychology is now a broad domain with different orientations, but it is based on a few basic assumptions. Its core goal is to understand how people develop and act within their sociocultural environment, the dynamics by which the social and cultural becomes psychological, and the dynamics by which people transform their social and cultural world. In my understanding, sociocultural psychology is based on four assumptions (Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1998; Valsiner, 2007, 2014; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007; Wagoner, Chaudhary & Hviid, 2014; Wertsch, 1998):

1. A focus on the unicity of the person; as psychology, it starts with the idea that each person is unique, and that she or he is, body and mind, experiencing the world, thinking, but also, dreaming, feeling and hoping;
2. Second, the approach considers that that person cannot be studied outside of their location within the social and cultural world, where they interact with others, with material and symbolic objects, in specific time and spaces; these situations or contexts have material and symbolic qualities which enable and constrain human action; in that sense it is a deeply dialogical psychology;
3. Third, and this is because it is a developmental science, it assumes the irreducibility of time, that is, the temporal, historical, and dynamic nature of human experience. In other words, it concentrates on processes, and development, at different levels of analysis (i.e. microgenetic changes within the person and in interactions; ontogenetic change, that is, the change of the person through time; sociogenesis, that is, transformations of the social environment itself);
4. Fourth, the specific emphasis of sociocultural psychology is on processes of sense-making. It is a psychology that tries to identify how, in a changing world, full of meanings, language and discourses, each person experiences the world, and makes sense of their existence.

It results from these assumptions that people's ability to think, reason or imagine are seen as the result of the person's trajectory in a complex social and cultural environment, during which she was exposed to many actions, discourses, pictures, movies, ways of organising time, space or activity, which are then internalised, that is, that they now organise the psychological activity, partly from within. Learning to do mathematics requires certain cognitive capacities, but these are allowed because the person has internalised cultural specific modes of counting, algorithms for specific operations, or the abstract language of algebra, first met in the social world and shared with others, and now guiding thought and experience in certain ways.

When we want to consider development in the life-course, two problems occur. First, cultural psychology has been good at observing the microgenesis of development in one given situation – often children at home, or at school. But most people do not live all their life in a homogeneous social and cultural environment; they move through different social settings; every day and over life, through countries, families or work experiences. People are not only socialised to one social setting, or internalise not only one type of cultural system. How can we account for these many experiences internalised? How do these combine in mind? What frictions or conflicts might come out? How does human experience layer up with time?

Second, if we understand that the social guides the person through daily interactions, and the enabling and constraining role of institutions, and social representations, how can people

still be unique? How can they define a life for themselves, and not only be defined by others? How to psychologically account for what is experienced as freedom, or agency? This is where I will introduce the notion of imagination.

Hence, sociocultural psychology is faced with two challenges, which I believe, are also challenges for social and developmental psychology as a whole: first, to account for the multiplicity of experiences that people accumulate through time, and second, for people's ability to create their unique trajectories. These two questions, in my view, are particularly relevant for us today; they are needed to understand people living in an extreme heterogeneous and rapidly changing society – and migrants, as well as older people, are especially confronted with such difficulties. I will come back to this, after sketching an integrative model.

### **An integrative model – a proposition**

Classical developmental models usually represent life trajectories in a relatively schematic way – as a staircase going upwards, like in Erikson, as a succession of stages as Piaget is frequently understood, or, as implicit in many discourses, as a curve going up to about 40s and going then downhill... Over the past years, together with various colleagues, such as Jaan Valsiner, Alex Gillespie, Pernille Hviid, and many others, we tried to develop models that account for development from a perspective closer to the person (Hviid & Zittoun, 2008; Zittoun et al., 2013a; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015a). Our work is based on a wide variety of data, often based on an ideographic approach – in-depth case studies – documented through different data, including reconstructive interviews, ethnographic work, secondary analysis of longitudinal data such as diaries and documentaries (Abbey & Zittoun, 2010; Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010; Zittoun, in press, 2009; Zittoun & de Saint-Laurent, 2015; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2012). In what follows, I will present the components of that model, and then show how it works through some examples.

The basic unit of analysis is the *sphere of experience* – a notion inspired by Alfred Schütz's work (Zittoun, 2012; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015b). A sphere of experience is a configuration of experiences, activities, representations and feelings, recurrently occurring in a given type of social (material and symbolic) setting. It is thus both subjective and objective. Different spheres of experiences can occur in the same setting – I can be working hard in my office at University, which is one sphere, and then have a laugh with a colleague passing by my office – which is another sphere. Applied to the life-course, this implies that over a day, or a week, we alternate spheres of experiences – from home to work, to the cinema, with friends, etc. Usually, we manage quite well these mild transitions. However, usually over a longer period of time – a month, a year – some spheres of experiences disappear, and new ones need to be created. Hence, finishing studies to start working is the end of the studies-related spheres of experiences, and demands the creation of professional ones. Similar things happen when we lose friends, move house or change country. Such phenomena are well known in developmental psychology; they correspond to 'life crises', or 'transitions'.

We used the term *rupture* to designate the subjective experience that some taken-for-granted sphere of experiences is questioned or destroyed, and new elaborations are needed. The notion of *transition* designates the processes by which a new sphere of experience is elaborated, until it also feels like a taken-for-granted: the transition until a new house feels like home, or a new occupation feels 'natural'. To analyse these transitions, we have distinguished three interdependent processes involved: identity transformations, new learning, and sense making. Typically, starting a new profession requires to learn to position oneself as professional, to be acknowledged as such, and to develop such an identity, this goes hand-in-hand with the progressive mastery of the skills demanded by the new tasks, but also the informal social rules, or modes of communication in the work place; and finally, this demands for the person to

make sense of it – to connect this experience to her past experience or develop future plans, or to elaborate the related emotions. This model has been very useful to understand why, in some cases, people resist change – for instance, because learning specific knowledge at school might question too deeply the sense of who they are (Hviid & Zittoun, 2008; Zittoun, 2006, 2014; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015b; Zittoun & Perret-Clermont, 2009). Such conception thus combines learning and development, with issues of social relations and recognition.

However, as we were analysing diverse life trajectories, we came to realise that people do not only live in practical situations, in what is the case. A great part of our psychological life is actually oriented toward places or situations that once *were* the case, or that *could* have been, or that, might or *might not* become true. We have thus distinguished proximal from distal spheres of experiences. A *proximal sphere of experience* is thus specific to a person, engaged here-and-now in certain conduct, in a given socially existing environment. In contrast, a *distal sphere of experience* is a sphere of experience which is explored through our imagination: when we revisit our childhood home, or when we think about what will do later in the day.

In these cases, these experiences do not necessarily have a material support in the here and now; yet, we experience them in our bodies and minds, and they can have some stability (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015a). Hence, Alex Gillespie, Flora Cornish, Emma-Louise Aveling and I have analysed the diary of June, a young woman during World War II in England; we could see that although she moved away from her hometown in a small south-east seacoast community to work in the fields as land girl, she very often went go back to it, imagining familiar places, or what her mother and her community would think of her conduct. In other words, the previously proximal experiences of June's home became, with time, distal experiences. Yet being distal, a sphere of experienced is nonetheless active: a tension arises as the person psychologically moves back and forth from proximal to distal experiences. Hence, a tension arose when June's wartime proximal experiences invited her to have many relations with young men; there, her distal experiences reminded her that she ought to be a 'decent woman', and that dating men would turn her into 'that sort of woman'. The tension resolved when June defined the situation in new terms, as part of a 'state of exception' due to war, before allowing her to define a new sense of autonomy (Zittoun et al., 2012; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015a). Hence, these tensions, or ruptures or disequilibrium, are the occasions of learning and development.

This example has two implications. First, in the long run, it implies that understanding a life course demands to understand the many proximal and distal experiences that compose it. These increase with time, and enter in dynamics and dialogue, generate tensions and resolutions. With Alex Gillespie, we have also tried to account for the many processes by which these experiences can thus be psychologically integrated, generalised, or rather remain conflictual. Such a model also allows describing the layered nature of our experience or its sedimented aspect – and how, in some circumstances, we adults still act as teenagers or feel like children.

Second, such understanding invites to give a closer attention to the role of imagination in the life course. For this, we went back to the history of imagination in psychology and the social sciences. Drawing on authors such as Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1931, 2004) and Winnicott (Winnicott, 2001), we consider imagination as a core dynamic of our mind, by which we temporarily live, or loop out of the here-and-now of a proximal sphere of experience, and – very importantly – to come back. It is thus

...The process of creating experiences that escape the immediate setting, which allow exploring the past or future, present possibilities or even impossibilities. [It is] is a social and cultural process, because, although it is always individuals who imagine, the process of imagination is made possible by social and cultural artefacts, it can be socially allowed or constrained, and because the consequences of imagination can be significant changes in the social world. (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016, p.2)

Hence, during the war, June sometimes remembered her home, that is imagined, about the past, using traces of her experiences, but also, by reading earlier entries of her diary, or watching films that represented the region she came from. The diary or the films were thus used as symbolic resources to imagine about the past, which often allowed her to make sense of the present. During the war, she engaged actively in discussions with others, in listening to various radio shows, or reading newspapers, to imagine what was happening on the frontline, which also enabled them to guide conducts. At times, she also would just watch Disney movies – an imaginary loop that brought some comfort.

Interestingly, a great deal of these imaginations were about her future as a woman and as a professional. Having worked on the home front, and also, having experienced her autonomy, would she, as she initially thought, marry a reasonable man and go back to her home community? Or perhaps, could she develop her professional skills, remain single, and engage in politics? She went for the second option, at a time where thousands of women had similar experiences. These imaginations of many were also relayed by media and public discourses and allowed a collective new imagination of the role of women in the British society.

With this example, I want to emphasise the dynamics brought by imagination. Imagining, or looping out of the present, is a developmental process. It changes the person and her sphere of experiences, at three different levels. At the level of microgenesis, leaving the here-and-now of a situation allows us to come with a new idea, a bit of relief, or a solution of a problem. At the ontogenetic level, imagination might be the means to create new pathways in times of ruptures or bifurcation. Finally, at the level of sociogenesis, or the transformation of society, it is the many imaginings of people, feeding what others imagine, that allow most social changes, as in case of June. Also, it is centuries of imagination about moon travels that created stories, tales and soon movies about moon travels, which nourished the imagination of people and scientists who, when the technologies finally allowed, brought humans to the moon (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016).

Up to this point, I have retraced the elements of a model that should allow describing the many experiences people go through in their daily life and life-course, and also, the integration that moving through time and space allows. I have also introduced the notion of imagination as looping out of the here and now which allows enriching the present, and inventing alternative life-paths. From such a model, we see emerging a person who is not only made by the social world, or guided by her instinct or genetic programme: she is also able to distance herself from a situation and imagine an alternative – and sometimes, she can be prevented from doing so. In any case, living in our complex world appears as much about what we really do and how we act, as about what we dream about, hope for, or regret (Zittoun et al., 2013b; Zittoun & Valsiner, in press).

### **On the relevance of an integrative model: Two current issues**

Why develop such kind of models? From a pragmatic perspective, models and concepts are good, or useful, if they allow us to see the world in a new or different way, or if they allow us to act in a novel way (Brinkmann, 2014; Cornish & Gillespie, 2009; James, 1904). For the last part of this text, I would like to turn to two fieldworks on which I am currently working with colleagues in Switzerland. Both, I believe, concern challenges that both our countries are currently facing: migration, and the ageing population. For each of them I will highlight some challenges appearing from the perspective just outlined.

#### *Trajectories of migration*

Over the past 20 years we moved away from a classical model of lower-qualification migration in Europe, or from former colonies in the UK, to more complex models, linked to the evolu-

tion of the European Union, and the change of the world's balance. In Switzerland this leads to very dual migration – a first group, highly qualified, migrates for economic reasons and because the country needs them, while the other group is made of people with lower qualifications or coming as refugees.

In the frame of an interdisciplinary project on the legal trajectories of migrants in the country, we are reconstructing the administrative trajectories of people's applications for a residency permit or Swiss Nationality, which we combine with a first-person perspective analysis of people's trajectory, based on interviews and letters they wrote<sup>2</sup>.

Charles is a man in his late 30s. Born in a country in which his father was subjected to political violence, the family emigrated in the mid-1990s – first the father, then the mother with their children. This means that aged 15, Charles had a long three-months-long experience of crossing Europe helped by smugglers, before being accepted in Switzerland as part of family reunion conditions. In Switzerland, Charles went through a long transition process: he was admitted to French integration classes, learned a trade, and started working as a qualified worker in Swiss industry. Ten years later, in 2003, now married, he applied for the Swiss nationality, writing on the application form that:

I feel well integrated in this [County] and I consider Switzerland as my country. I am married here and I would like to live here forever as full citizen, sharing the fate of the country that welcomed me.

In other words, from a subjective perspective, Charles feels at home – his local spheres of experiences are taken for granted. What he now demands is simply a formal recognition of his experience.

In the Swiss naturalisation procedure, the first step is to ask the State for the authorisation to engage the procedure, which implies a first evaluation of fulfilment of two legal conditions (described by the articles 14 and 15 of the Federal Law on the Nationality). The first is about duration: the person has to have lived at least 12 years in Switzerland (years between 10 and 20 counting double, and three years in the canton where the application is made). The second is about 'Aptitude (Capacity)': the person needs to be 'integrated in the Swiss community; be accustomed to the Swiss mode of life and Swiss usages; conform to the Swiss legal order; and does not compromise inner or outer Swiss security'. Hence, if the first point is quite easy to establish, the second point is more open to interpretation: who and what criteria can evaluate how much a candidate is 'accustomed to the Swiss mode of life and Swiss usages' given the fact that Switzerland has four national languages, 26 cantons with their school systems and food specialties, each of them with urban centers and countryside villages?

Concretely, after Charles made his application, the State delegates to the County the evaluation of the case, which delegates to the Commune, which consults the local Police. A Police officer makes an enquiry for which he consults Charles' former employers, and writes a report, in which Charles appears as having friends, being involved in local associations, mastering the language, yet having had a few job changes and a period of unemployment. He concludes that Charles seems 'integrated but has a bit of professional instability'. This statement is then read by an employee at the Commune, who 'recommends a negative prior notice. Professional instability and doubt regarding his integration ground our position.' This goes to the County, who sends a negative recommendation to the State. Charles finally receives a letter from the State saying that 'the regional authorities proposed a negative prior notice. In particular, they doubt about your integration in this Country. ...Naturalisation seems hypothetical'.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Immigrant's trajectories of integration, between indeterminate (legislative) criteria and uncertain life-courses: Analysis of legal cases', project supported by the Swiss National Fund (N° CR1111\_147287/1), directed by Pascal Mahon and Tania Zittoun, with the collaboration of Flora Di Donato and Anne Lavanchy.

In terms of his life-course, after a massive transition, Charles has developed over the last 10 years many interrelated proximal spheres of experience: a family, work and leisure. He is, in that sense, a ‘good citizen’. He has as project to live his life and ‘shared the fate of the country’ – a reasonable imagination of the future. The refusal to the authorisation to apply comes back as a social non recognition of these, and of his subjective experience of being integrated. Charles thus feels this mismatch as unfair, and writes back to the State, explaining that his one week of unemployment is actually quite due to the nature of his job – he indeed works in a domain of the industry which is highly dependent on the economical conjuncture – and that he cannot be personally be held responsible for market problems affecting many, and thus asks for reconsideration.

At this point, he still imagines a life for himself, and over the next years expands his spheres of experience: he goes through the rupture of a divorce and remarriage, he opens a pizzeria, he stops some of his leisure activities (for instance he stops to be a soccer trainer himself) to do some combat sports, and becomes engaged in politics – he is one of the political representative in the communal assembly. Hence, both subjectively, and for us observers, Charles appears as someone creating a dynamic life-course, who engages in the local life, and even participates to social change.

Yet a second round of the enquiry comes back to him with a second negative prior notice for the authorisation, after an administrative employee identified some unpaid bills. In a third letter, now ten years later and after having fixed the debt, Charles radically changes tone – and promises ‘on his honor’ that he will pay his bills and submit to the Swiss law. As a reply he learns that his application had been archived in the meantime – he can only start the procedure over again.

At this point, we could say that social institutions strongly channeled Charles’ life-course. It demanded his learning of the legal system, and brought him to master a specific language of obedience. It also transformed his identity: from a person feeling home and well integrated, he is now positioned as foreigner that does not deserve legal recognition. Indeed, in an interview with our team, Charles comments on this trajectory by saying that rather than integrating, the Law currently ‘disintegrates’ people. Finally, in terms of sense making and imagination, it obviously shatters his dream to ‘share the fate of the country’.

With this first case study, I wanted to illustrate the interdependencies of sociocultural and institutional guidance, and the making of a life. On the analytical plane, I wish to highlight the necessity to distinguish between trajectories as they appear on a social map, and the more subjective experience of it. The latter, I argued, is made both from proximal and distal spheres of experiences; yet strong social guidance might threaten imagination. How can people continue to feel developing and not ‘disintegrating’, in such conditions?

### *Ageing*

That it is possible to maintain imagining in a strongly constrained setting is particularly clear in the case of older people, the second issue I wish to address.

Most of our rich industrialised societies face the challenge of an increased proportion of people over 65 in a good health for a period often as long as one’s whole adulthood. If we don’t want to consider that people simply decline for 30 years, we need to have a psychology that accounts for learning and development after 65 (Davidson, 2011; Stenner, McFarquhar & Bowling, 2011) – yet social sciences currently realises that we lack the means to describe and understand ‘ageing’ (Baars & Philipson, 2013, p.13). Social psychology has also shown that the social representations of ageing are quite negative (e.g. Lamont, Swift & Abrams, 2015), which implies that it may be difficult for older people to identify with their own condition. It brings some people to actively keeping young, others to fulfil the demands of ‘successful ageing’ with

the risk of alienation (Freeman, 2011; Stenner et al., 2011), or ‘narrative foreclosure’, that is, a situation ‘in which people had gathered the conviction that the story of their lives was essentially over’ (Freeman, 2011, p.3).

From our perspective, imagination might actually be precisely the means by which people can consider their lives in a new light, and keep possibilities open. We therefore conducted an exploratory case study in a nursing home<sup>3</sup>. The transition to nursing life implies a radical reduction of people’s proximal spheres of experience, both because their life is now physically confined to the material and social organisation of a total institution (Goffman, 1956), and because of physical frailty, often characterised by the risk of falling. We documented the spatial and material arrangements, how the institution is organised, and also, how people move in it, and use the objects and spaces.

First, life takes place in the institution – rooms, corridor, dining room or living room. Yet each resident uses the spatial, material and social affordances differently in the constitution of their spheres of experiences. Some, for instance, like to go to the living room to meet others, others go there to be let alone; some rather find their intimacy in their own room, others go smoke outside the institution, or others knit in her preferred corridor by the window.

Second, material and semiotic object enable the exploration of distal spheres of experiences. For instance, when the interviewer asks Clara about the objects she took from home and now has on her table next to the bed, she points to a black Virgin in porcelain:

Clara: The virgin I like very much, yes. I think about Lourdes as well when I am praying, it is the most beautiful pilgrimage you can do. I would like very much to go back there before I die. This year I couldn’t go but I will go next year.

Isabelle, another resident, spends a lot of time in her room, watching TV, and also the board with pictures of her family. She says:

Isabelle: I look at them and I think about them, I think about good memories, I wonder what they do. I hope they are well and they will have a beautiful life. I live in these pictures.

It is hard to explain. My children, my grandchildren, my family – it is my life.

With these two examples, a different reality than the observable one appears. On the one side, proximal spheres of experience are reconfigured in the actual institutional space, and residents overlap with small margin of appropriation. However, each resident has also distal experiences. People travel in time and space, in their imagination, and supported by objects and artifacts, they go back to past experience, visit their families and their daily lives, and also, explore the future, their own likely or unlikely one, and that from next generations.

Although this is very preliminary, I would like to underline that getting old does not mean necessarily, as often believed, just engaging in reminiscing; rather, there is a reconfiguration of the life space, a reshuffling of spheres of experiences, both proximal and distal. Because these are new, reconfigured or transformed, there still can be learning, identity transformation, and through imagination, renewed sense making.

Hence, through these two cases, looking at what makes a life, and the core role of imagination, we may start to address differently, and perhaps, protect what allows development during the whole life-course, using cultural and social resources despite social and cultural constraints.

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## Openings

In this paper, I have tried to highlight basic assumptions for a sociocultural psychology, a psychology that integrates both questions raised by developmental psychology and the concerns of a social psychology. I have then proposed the model we currently work with – a mid-range model, which gives both tools to describe many cases of transitions and life course, and to highlight some of its turning points, facilitation and ruptures. I have added to this a second important element, a concern for the role of imagination in the life-course. Imagination is, and this is my claim, the core dynamic by which we maintain engaged in life, travel in and through spheres of experiences, and can escape the social, material and symbolic constraints exerted upon us.

Historically, we can remember that most authoritative states have tried to constrain people's imagination by controlling access to cultural tools – imagination is indeed dangerous and emancipatory (Marková, in press). Also, it can be suggested that the societal challenges we are currently facing demands some leap of imagination to be anticipated, if not solved – a lack of imagination can be disastrous (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Through two examples related to current societal challenges, I tried to emphasise the enabling, but also potential constraining role of institutional settings, and the threat they can represent to people's very core of freedom, their imagination. This raises ethical and political issues far beyond my role as psychologist.

Yet there is one implication which I would like to finish with. We know very well that social sciences themselves are socially constructed (Danziger, 2008; Valsiner, 2013; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000). We tend to forget that the ways in which we address certain problems are actually following invitations of policy makers, and not necessarily the most accurate in terms of psychological development. But more importantly, we should keep in mind that our however modest attempts to account for psychological and social issues do participate to the public understanding of specific problems (Moscovici, 2008). In that sense, it is our responsibility to develop new models and understandings that can help us to shed light on emerging social realities. In a very sketchy way, I tried to address the issue of the developmental paths of migrants and older people. Yet I believe more generally that as community of researchers, we should be able to draw on both traditions of developmental and social psychology to develop models that might allow society to think ahead of itself – the models we are developing may become the means to imagine and transform societies.

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