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IMAGINING ONE'S LIFE: IMAGINATION, TRANSITIONS AND DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES

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The 9th Conspi conference has as theme "psicologia e os desafios do mundo contemporaneo" – which is an ample and ambitious programme. My perspective is that of a sociocultural psychologist, and I will propose to consider life trajectories – how they are made, how they can be challenged, but also their flexibility. My argument is that imagination is what we have to address the challenges of our daily lives, and also, what society as a whole has to be prepared with, and address major transformations.

Sociocultural Psychology

Sociocultural psychology is a field of psychology built on the assumption what we are, as humans, cultural beings. This idea is not new, but has come and gone in the history of psychology, and has been now substantially explored since the 90s. It draws on the work of the Russian psychologists Lev Vygotsky (van der Veer, & Valsiner, 1993; Vygotsky, 1929, 1986), and on older pragmatists' psychologists and philosophers such as William James (1890) and Charles Peirce (1877). Sociocultural or cultural psychology has been defended and promoted by Jerome Bruner (1977, 1990, 2003), that many of you may know for his developmental work on scaffolding and on narratives, by James Wertsch (Wertsch, 1991, 1998), now a specialist of cultural memory, by Michael Cole (Cole, 1996), who showed the importance of mastering cultural tools, especially in education of the minority populations, and also by Jaan Valsiner. Valsiner's work allows us to

see the complex dynamic by which we make sense of our complex cultural environment, but also, by which these environments, buzzing with discourses and messages of all kind, guide our conduct and our choices (Valsiner, 1998, 2000, 2007, 2012a, 2012b, 2014). In Brazil, this tradition is well known, and has been pursued by teams in the Nordeste and further in Brazil. In effect, the capacity of this psychology to account both for social determination and individual action allowed it to study different issues, such as early development (Lyra, 2007), naming practices (Rabinovich, Silva, Souza, & Tôrres, 2011), young adolescents in urban centres (Mattos & Branco, 2014; Oliveira, Lopes, Pinto, & Souza, 2003), dialogical dynamics (Simão, & Valsiner, 2007), the trajectories of women in their families (Bastos, Uriko, & Valsiner, 2012), poverty as social and cultural process (Bastos, Rabinovich, & Valsiner, 2009), etc. Cultural psychology indeed develops tools that allow accounting for a diversity of life situations, to understand how these are embedded in their social and cultural environment, but also, to identify processes of change and creativity in each situation.

As I understand it, sociocultural psychology lies on four main assumptions. First, it starts with the idea that each person unique, and that she or he is, body and mind, experiencing the world, thinking, but also, dreaming and feeling and hoping. Second, the approach considers that person cannot be thought or studied outside of their location within the social and cultural world, were he or she interacts 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. 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 dynamics, processes of becoming, not traits or typologies of actions. 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 – often chaotic as a whole – each person makes sense of their existence. Let me go closer in the question of development.

Development in the lifecourse

We live in time, and whether we want it or not, we do change from the moment of our conception to that of our death. This is an intuition developed by philosophers, and which came into psychology through the work of William James, among others, who wrote about consciousness that "it flows", like one may say it rains. If consciousness flows, our experience is a river, and our life trajectories might be seen as long river beds, which take different shapes, some large and open, some tortuous and wild. Change in human life is the object of developmental psychology. Traditionally, developmental psychologists have, depending on their core interests – intelligence, affects, or interactions – focused on specific aspects of changes in human life. They have on this basis often sketched ideal-typical trajectories – the staircase model of Erikson (1959), the hill-like model of Baltes (1997). Most of these trajectories fix a "top level" to be achieved and wonder how people may get there – to "hypothetico-deductive thinking" (Baltes, 1997; Perret-Clermont, & Barrelet, 2008; Piaget, 1966), to "wisdom" (Baltes, & Kunzmann, 2004; Erikson, 1959), or to the "capacity to work and love", in Freud's terms. These ideals of course reflect sociocultural norms, and reflect certain visions of society, and the status it confers to its members of different ages.

Over the past thirty years, in Europe and the US, we have been witnessing a progressive change in the way in which society understand itself. To be oversimplifying, we moved from a post-war society believing in progress, where life trajectories had good chances to be ascendant in the sense that education would lead to professions that give status, recognition and identity, and where family, seen as the kernel of society, was protected thanks to various norms, to a

society that discovered its own limits. In today's society, life trajectories seem much frailer, dependent on a volatile economic market, open to the diversity of forms of life, and exposed to democratic societies' difficulty to protect themselves from more aggressive tendencies. The implication in terms of developmental psychology is that it is not so easy to define the best possible achievements of a lifecourse, or what is the ideal-shape of a life trajectory. In effect, professions are volatile and not always for a lifetime, family ties can be undone and redone, societal organisation can be deeply transformed. This raises two questions: how can we describe the lifecourse, and how can we qualify a "good life"?

In order to describe the lifecourse, we have defined a set of notions which allow mapping out trajectories. We can first state that each place or activity in which we regularly engage constitutes as "sphere of experience". The child that interacts with his mother around dinner time has one sphere of experience there, which is different from the sphere of experience of playing-with-friends in the trees. Every sphere of experience demands certain activities, has certain goals and emotional tonality; we now when we are in a "known" sphere of experience, because we now what we have to do, who we are, and how to interact with others. Hence, I will use the term 'sphere of experience' to designate a configuration of experiences, activities, representations and feelings, recurrently occurring in a given type of social (material and symbolic) setting – it is one of the various regular, stabilized patterns of experience in which a person is likely to engage on a regular basis. (Zittoun, 2012a) A *proximal sphere of experience* is thus specific to a person, engaged in certain conduct, in a given socially existing environment. The notion combines first and third person's perspectives because it combines both the person's phenomenological experience with the setting, resources, and semiotic environment that support that experience. (Zittoun, & Gillespie, 2015a)

During the lifecourse, we progressively expand and diversify the spheres of experience in which we live: as children, we move from

our room, to the family table, to the courtyard; then come school, the playground, and the street. Typically, adolescence is a period in which not only many new spheres of experiences are constituted – peer-groups, first professional experiences, but also more or less official hobbies – it will also lead to the disappearance of former spheres of experience. Hence, young people eventually move away from their parents' house to an accommodation alone or with a partner; school will disappear to be replaced by university or work, etc. Hence, over a day, a week, or a year, people move through diverse spheres of experience. Some movements are transitive – people go back and forth to certain spheres, such as from home to work, and back – and other movements are intransitive, when some spheres of experience disappear and new ones are created. (Valsiner, 2007) Typically, with old age, the world can shrink: older persons who used to have an active life may reduce their daily routine just to one or two spheres of experience – their room and a daily meeting with the shopkeeper, as long as they are mobile enough.

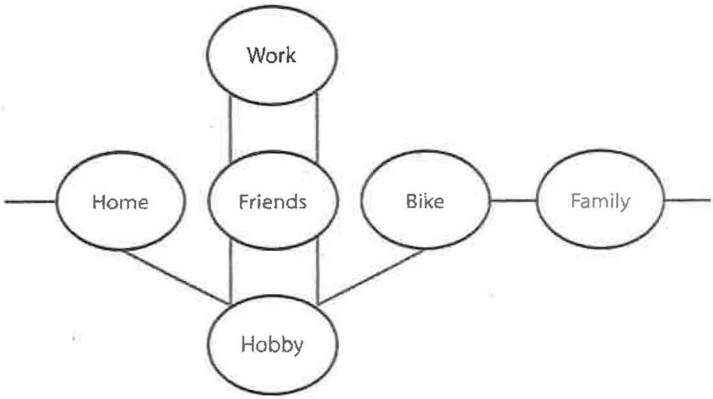

Figure 1 - Proximal spheres of experience

Interesting things happen, psychologically, when people leave a sphere of experience and have to create a new one. This is what we can call a rupture – one sphere of experience, one bit of "taken-for-granted" life disappears; with it, usually, some new sphere of experience needs to be elaborated. Such ruptures have been thematised as 'crises' (Erikson, 1959) or 'irritations' (Dewey, 1946), etc. The causes of ruptures can be of different scale and origin: a war, moving country, becoming a teenager. From a developmental perspective, the important aspect is, however, not the cause, but the fact that people do *experience* the event as a rupture – hence, moving is not a rupture per se, for instance for the ambassador whose normality is to move country every four years. (Gyger Gaspoz, 2013) Then, the interesting aspect is what follows the experienced rupture, the changes and processes by which a new balance, or new adjustments to the situation can be found. This process of elaborating a new sphere of experience, is what we can call a *transition*. Transitions are the processes following experienced ruptures, which allow the elaboration of a new adjustment to the environment. (Zittoun, 2006a) Transitions are dealt with differently if they are socially shared or normative, or individual and very idiosyncratic. (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2004; Levy, Ghisletta, Le Goff, Spini, & Widmer, 2005)

Figure 2 - Rupture - transition

Transitions usually demand the transformation of three aspects of human experience, aspects that characterize each sphere and allow it to feel "homely". Transitions in effect entail (Perret-Clermont, & Zittoun, 2002; Zittoun, 2006b):

> a. Identity redefinitions or transformations: as new spheres of experience are built, people's sense of who they are, how they are seen by others, are typically raised; issues of recognition are then easily reflected in people's sense of who they are (Hundeide, 2003; Winther-Lindqvist, 2012);
>
> b. Learning: new spheres of experience demand renewed mastery of specific ways of acting or thinking, or the acquisition of language, skills, informal competencies (Heath, 2004; Walker, 2007);
>
> c. Sense making: new spheres of experience need to "make sense" in a person's life, be related to others, have reason to take place in a person's trajectory; sense making thus includes the elaboration of the emotional or symbolic aspects of these changes, and the maintenance of a sense of integrity and self-continuity. (Erikson, 1959; Zittoun, 2008)

These three dynamics are usually deeply related and mutually dependent. Becoming a migrant – creating new spheres of experience that will fill "home" enough in a new environment (Märtsin, & Mahmoud 2012) — typically demands radical social identity transformation, the acquisition of language and social implicit rules, and often the modification of life projects, and so on. Becoming a mother demands, for a teenager who becomes pregnant, to learn how to take care of children and cook, and to position and perspective herself as a mother; the new life situation – she not being a student anymore, but now and for some years, a mother with responsibility – demands new understandings, projects, and revised expectations.

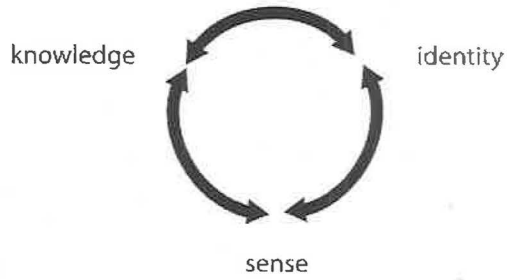

Figure 3 - Three reelated processes of change (Perret-Clermont, & Zittoun, 2002; Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson, & Psaltis, 2003)

Interestingly, there is another type of experiences that people have as they move through life. Not only do they move physically through places – from home to work, from their village to town – they can also move psychologically. One can thus leave one's home village to live as an adult somewhere, but once there, move back in one's mind to one's village, when remembering the view of the forest or the meal one's grandmother used to cook. A person can forget that she is sitting in a crowded bus when she opens a novel and start to read, and thus rather than travelling in a large Brazilian town, travels with a character in the forest of Alaska. People can meet friends to dance or play theater and, doing so, enter in a very different world, rich of emotions and dramas. We propose to call *distal spheres of experiences* the "micro-worlds" these experiences entail. (Zittoun, & Gillepie, 2015b)

As you can see, if we place our analytical perspective at the height of the person's experience while keeping an eye on what's going around, we see that her daily trajectories move through a wide diversity of proximal and distal experiences. At a larger scale as well, a lifecourse is made of these alternance of spheres of experiences, some coexisting, some also conflicting, or some disappearing forever. As a whole, then, as the phenomenologist Alfred Schütz described, we spend our lives just moving in and out of different worlds, sometimes with what he called "mild shocks", sometimes with harder transitions. (Schutz, 1945)

Hence, to come back to my first image, we now start to have a view of life like an unquiet river, with streams and backward streams, whirlpools, and pockets of quiet water.

So far I have identified a few notions that allow describing the lifecourse. My proposition is that this gives us a basic grammar to observe very different transitions that constitute the lifecourse – from the child moving back and forth to school and home, the person changing job or moving place, to the experience of living through the war.

Here comes the second question I was raising: how, as psychologist, can we define a "good life"? The model I was sketching so far does not hold any overall trajectory as better than others; it considers that developmental changes occur from our first move to our very last breath – even getting old or losing some capacities demands learning, identity change and sense making. To make a very long question short, I think we cannot know what is the best form of development for children or for adults – most criteria are normative, open to local ideologies and various interests. So, does it mean that any change is developmental, including learning to harm others? Avoiding normativity does not imply relativism; as psychologists, we know that minimal conditions need to be preserved: experience shows that too strong challenges to people's sense of who they are might lead to psychological suffering. Based on this, we have formulated that change can be considered developmental as long as it does not alienate the person from herself, or from the others that count for her. (Zittoun, & Perret-Clermont, 2009) But how can we maintain a sense of who we are in times of changes? How can we maintain a feeling of connection from significant others when we are far from them? This is where I now want to introduce the notion of imagination.

Imagination

My argument here is that imagination plays a fundamental role in the lifecourse. Imagination allows us to expand our experience beyond the here-and-now, to connect with what is past or absent, and to create new possibilities for the future.

Imagination has long been ignored by psychologists, or, when studied, reserved to children, artists or people with pathologies. More recently, authors have seen in it the precursor of logical and rational thinking. (Harris, 2000; Piaget, 1992) Others have seen its advantage in planning or counterfactual reasoning. (Bogdan, 2013; Byrne, 2005) In our work, we have turned back to Lev Vygotsky's proposition, who saw imagination as the core process of personal and cultural development (D. Singer, & Singer, 1992; Singer, 2000; Vygotsky, 1994, 2004), and expanded it in the light of current research. (Zittoun, & Cerchia, 2013; Zittoun, & Gillespie, 2015a; Zittoun & al., 2013)

In our recent work, we define imagination as the process by which we temporarily disengage from the here-and-now of proximal experiences, to engage in a distal experience. Hence, we imagine when we recall our childhood room, when we look through the window and imagine how nice it would be to be lying on the beach, when we wonder what we will cook tonight, or where we will live in five years. We also imagine when we are dreaming, when we are engrossed in a novel or a film, or when we are painting. In other words, imagination is a process of disjunction from the here and now. It is a loop – away, and then back. This loop can be described on three dimensions – we can imagine about the past or the future; we can imagine concrete things, like a cake, or general or abstract issues – like all the instances in which one was a "good person"; and it can be quite plausible, as when we imagine what will happen next week, or very implausible, when we try to imagine the inhabitants of planet Mars. Imagination is thus a dynamic loop, and it is sequential: it has a beginning – the

trigger – a development, the loop, and an end, the junction back to the ongoing proximal experience. From a developmental perspective, the interesting thing is that such loops have very important outcomes, as I will now explore.

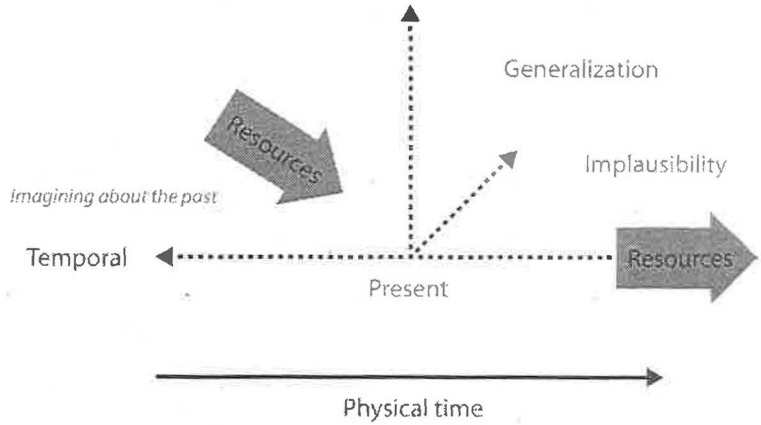

Figure 4 - The loop of imagination, after Zittoun and Gillespie (2015)

The work of imagination in the lifecourse

Imagination participates to development at different scales, which I am now going to illustrate with different empirical examples. These come from diverse sources collected over time. Indeed, the present reflexion is based on theoretical work on the one hand, and on numerous case studies on the other. Among others, I have produced data to explore the role of fiction and symbolic resources in life transitions (Zittoun, 2004, 2006b, 2007); recently, together with Alex Gillespie (Gillespie, Cornish, Aveling, & Zittoun, 2008; Gillespie, & Zittoun, 2010; Zittoun, & Gillespie, 2012, 2015a, 2015b), Jaan Valsiner (Zittoun et al., 2013), Constance de Saint-Laurent (Zittoun, & de Saint-Laurent, 2015), we have analysed different corpus of longitudinal public data, as well as data collected by colleagues and students.

First, imagination occurs in daily situated activities, in which people are engaged alone or with others. It is the case when someone thinks about how to refurbish a room, what to cook for dinner, or when one is travelling and looking out of the bus window. Imagination can be observed when children play, or solve a school task; when adults are engaged in sport, in music playing, or in discussing. In these situation, imagination has different outcomes: it plays a role in emotional release, as when imagining something funny or relaxing in a stressful situation (Oppenheim, 2012); it can bring to self-knowledge or identity transformation, as when one goes back through memory or explores possible projects for self; it can actually guide action or learning, as when imagining travelling alone leads a person to take driving classes; but also, it can have relational outcome, as when imagining some joint project increases proximity to someone. Any examples as these can be analysed with the loop model described above: we can identify what triggers imagination, what resources nourish and constrain it, and what are its outcomes. We can also describe the variations of that loop.

In a first, simple example, here Zuzana,[1] a young married woman living with her husband and baby in her parents' flats, is expecting to move to an independent flat where they could finally have an independent life:

> We're hoping for a flat so we can move. I don't know when. It has to be furnished which isn't easy. When we'll be on our own, it'll be better. I don't like it like this anymore. (Zuzana, 1983; Trestíková, 2009)

Here Zuzana speak in the present, triggered by an interviewer that asks her what she wishes. The imagination of having a new flat is nourished by various representations of what is a well-furnished flat, in that sociocultural context; it has as outcomes to encourage

Zuzana to be oriented towards this near future. The imagination itself is oriented toward a close future; it is concrete and also quite realistic. In such a case, the distal experience which is imagining the future will progressively take more shape, be more concrete, and eventually, guide actual experience into a proximal sphere of experience.

Other cases can be more impressive. In the following example, Charles, an elite sportsman, is interviewed on his use of cultural resources in coping with a life-threatening injury. (Rebetez, 2014) Charles explains how, trekking in South America alone, far from his base camp, he found himself walking barefoot on what looked like soft mud, but was actually molten lava. Deeply burnt, he had to find a way to go back to the camp where his girlfriend was waiting for him.

> INTERVIEWER: So you were really in pain, pain? Do you remember your first reaction toward your pain? Physically? You are there with carbonized feet, what did you say to yourself?
>
> CHARLES: You don't think, it is survival. In moments when you suffer enormously you. I had moments of discouragement, and then if she [his girlfriend] would not have been there I think I would have stayed on the floor and I would not have moved because *the pain was so strong.* [...] I could not think anymore, *I was only pain,* I was 70 kg of pain. I was there, I did not know what to do. [...] *My brain was disconnected.* [...] then I had moments where I told myself, but these Tibetan monks – I have read many books on Buddhism and Hinduism – they can separate themselves from the pain, they say pain does not exist, that if you think the mental is stronger than the pain [pause] So I had moments during which I told myself [pause] *I was saying, yes I am in the snow.* Imagining myself in cold, in the snow, in- Not the whole time, but I could do it for a while, and then I was plunging back. But I was trying, *I told myself, now is the moment* [...]
>
> INTERVIEWER: So you were really concentrating, you were in pain, but you were doing this psychic effort?

> CHARLES: Yes, *I was sending white light*, I always do that in difficult situations. White light [pause] I was imagining my feet in the snow, and the blisters closing down. And I had to tell myself that I was not yet an Indian Sadhu. (Rebetez, 2014, pp. 2-3, our translation, emphasis in original, in Zittoun, & Gillespie, 2015a)

Let me analyze this example with the "loop model" described earlier. In this case, imagination is triggered by saturation of the real, which is too strong and unbearable. Charles realizes he needs to imagine an alternative situation, to provide psychological relief from his immediate situation, and that this imagining needs to be guided. For this he uses two sets of resources. First, he uses symbolic and semiotic resources, such as his readings about Oriental religion and practices, his personal experience of snow, the image of "white light", and perhaps some techniques learned through his sport training. Using these semiotic resources, Charles uncouples from the proximal situation, he "loops out" of his immediate pain. He uses the resource to imagine an alternative reality, namely, himself in the snow or in the cold. A first outcome of this is that, as the looping was effective, it relieved the pain. The fact that Charles is "expelled" from this imagining, and brought back to his demanding pain, is precisely due to the looping nature of imagination. Second, Charles uses the memory and anticipation of his girlfriend waiting for him. The second outcome of the looping is thus that it a concretely allows Charles to walk long enough to return to the camp and thus save his life. Altogether, imagination saves Charles life. We can also say that the loop was first oriented toward the past (Buddhist readings), to the future (getting back to camp), and to alternative realities (walking on snow). On the second dimension, the loop is both abstract (white night and, snow are general categories) and concrete (embodied pain, the sensation of snow) — these are overgeneralized sensual experiences. (Valsiner, 2007b) Finally, Charles' imagining is quite un-plausible, as he ironically comments himself, he tried to imagine *as-if* he were an Indian monk

(see also Josephs, 2002). Moreover, his feet were not on snow. Indeed, this sequence of imagination is necessarily un-real for it to have its quite real outcome, namely, relief from the very real experience of pain. However, the outcome of this imagining is a triumph over reality, namely, Charles ability to make his way back to camp and, thus, save his own life. (Zittoun, & Gillespie, 2015a, chapter 5)

Not all examples of imagination are as dramatic as Charles case. But all have comparable features, and have the power to reorient the socially situated activity and to transform the ongoing proximal sphere of experience. Imagination occurs both in mundane and trivial situations, and in situations in which it allows people to survive extreme situations of poverty, prison or deprivation, which otherwise would have alienated a person. (Cohen, & Taylor, 1992)

Imagination in the lifecourse

Second, we can observe outcomes of imagination at the level of the lifecourse itself. Using longitudinal material (diaries, longitudinal documentaries) we have shown how imagination can intervene in the shape of a lifecourse.

First, imagination plays an important role in dynamics of rupture and transition. In effect, it is at moments that people experience as ruptures from the taken from granted that action is suspended, and that new modes of actions need to be defined. But where to start? Typically, by exploring possibilities, trying out options and failing. Adolescence, as a period of many ruptures and rich in transitions, is also a period of many imaginings, some of them are actually explored, other remaining fantasies. We have analyzed the case of Rachel, a young woman, who, asked about her future, would respond, age 11:

> I'd like to become a journalist, a reporter, actually. I would like to go for adventures. And at the same time to be able to write, because I like it very much. [..] I like to write very much... Oh,

> I have a diary, I make up stories and I write poetry as well. (Rachel, 11, DVD 4 in Bakhti, 2010).

As Rachel moves into her teenager years, many of her conducts will actually be "adventurous" – in her proximal spheres of experiences such as her relationship to young men, or life-changing trips – imagination having indicated possible pathways up into her adulthood. (Zittoun, & de Saint-Laurent, 2015) However, she will eventually become a librarian, which suggests a more distal way of pursuing these adventures.

Second, imagination creates distal experiences; some are temporary, while some others become recurrent and stable worlds in people's lives, until they are turned into actual proximal spheres. Let us turn to the case of a young man, Stanislav – the husband of Zuzana – who grew up under the Communist years in Czechoslovakia. Among his many spheres of experiences, he was constructing various electronic machines; he one day built a TV satellite dish that allowed him, in the early 80s, to capture TV shows from western Germany – otherwise inaccessible information in the Eastern bloc. He then became curious about this distal world, and found books to teach himself German. In other words, his proximal sphere of hobby opened up a new distal sphere of experience – that of a quasi-unreal Germany; this has as outcomes that Stanislav engaged in learning a language. The fall of communism in 1989 was a major rupture in everyone's life. As people lost their state-defined jobs, most people had to engage in transitions and redefine their professional capacities; Stanislav became a Czech to German translator for technical companies:

> Before the revolution I built a satellite receiver. Suddenly our living room was a place where these instant, cool images flashed through, with words we didn't understand. What could you do with that? We bought a book and began teaching ourselves. Zuzana quit after a while. And today I make my living as an interpreter. (Trestíková, 2009)

In other words, Stanislav's electronic passion, resulting in a satellite dish, allowed him to imagine the life beyond the closed borders of his country, and this led him to learn German. That distal sphere of experience, developed through imagination, thus had as outcome the mastery of German. The skill itself could thus be transferred from to the proximal sphere of experience of his work life, and turned out to be a very useful post-communism knowledge. Hence, an "imaginary Germany", is turned into a new proximal sphere of experience, which opens up a new life path.

This is the power of imagination: it opens up new life-paths and allows for deep transformations of the lifecourse. (Zittoun, in press; Zittoun et al., 2013; Zittoun, & de Saint-Laurent, 2015)

Imagination changes the social world

Imagination has outcomes in the immediate spheres of experiences, in creating new life-paths, but also, in transforming people's lives and their social worlds.

One example we can take from our study of the life of June, a young woman during World War II in England. Originally from a modest, relatively conformist family, she grew up with the idea that women should marry young, with a decent man, and behave well. War brought her, together with millions of women, to be conscripted to the war effort, in the agriculture and industry, while men were sent to the front. During the years of the war, away from home, getting expertise and recognition, these women became independent professionals; they also saw young soldiers come and go, and engaged in romantic explorations that would have otherwise been forbidden, developing the sense that a very special time was going on. Consequently they started to imagine different forms of womanhood than that of the prewar; and this, in turn, allowed many of them to define new trajectories of womanhood. Interestingly, these new options, lived by hundreds of thousand young

women during the war, were not lonely imaginations; these were socially shared, and supported by the media. Individual imaginations where shared, were crystallized into new cultural elements, and these turned into new social projects, for instance with new political parties in which women played an active role. (Gillespie et al., 2008; Zittoun, Aveling, Gillespie, & Cornish, 2012; Zittoun, & Gillespie, 2015b)

Hence, at this third level, imagination can create new distal experiences that can be socially shared and bring to the creation of new artefacts, which become resources for more imagining. When times are ready, and enough people and artefacts confer existence this distal sphere of experience, it can actually bring to social transformations, that is, new proximal experiences. It is through such dynamics can minority group can change their environment, for instance, when groups of favelas dancers can gain recognition and change their social conditions. (Jovchelovitch, & Priego-Hernandez, 2013)

One very typical example of this is the history of space exploration. From the first lonely dreams of exploring the moon, to folktales, images, and films, humankind was largely familiar through imagination with the possibility of flying to the moon; the scientific concretization of this last century was just the result of practical actions long enabled by this shared imagination. (Zittoun, & Gillespie, 2015a, Chapter 7).

The development of imagination

Classically, psychology has studied the development of imagination in childhood, and then in some cases, its diversification in daydream and cultural experiences. In adult life, studies have been focused on creativity and innovation, which has direct socially acknowledgeable outcomes. My proposition is that imagination itself develops all along the lifecourse.

First, imagination develops along the lifecourse. In a given sphere of experience, and across spheres of experience, imagination is

nourished by all kind of personal experiences and social resources. It gets a life of its own, can nourish other spheres of experiences, and be nourished by then. It becomes blended, rich, differentiated, organized, generalised, and articulated. (Vygotsky, 1931)

Second, imagination plays a main role in the personalization of people's lives, or in what can be called the "emergence of the subject". (Zittoun, 2012b) People may live in same circumstances, face comparable difficulties, or be forced to limit their actions and choices; yet imagination, although culturally guided, is every person's unique creation and freedom. (Zittoun, 2014) There are many testimonies of war, political or concentration camps prisoners who explain that they survived an alienating reality thanks to their imagination, allowing them to go back where they came from, pursuing their home lives, seeing their children growing, rereading their preferred book, or playing with reality. (Bouska, & Pinerova, 2009)

Third, one of the by-products of the maturation of imagination is what Jaan Valsiner calls "personal life philosophies" (Valsiner, 2007; Zittoun et al., 2013), which are the motives, or the lesson learned from life. Generalized principles, these are often expressed in metaphorical terms, and have the power to guide many further actions and experiences. For instance, twenty years after his marriage with Zuzana, divorced and remarried, Stanislav observes his life and the evolution of the society; he summarizes:

> I feel I'm lucky in that if I now look back, I've the feeling I've never had it so good as I do today. And this state of mind is pretty constant for me now. I remember a time in my childhood when I was looking forward to being an adult. Then I became one and since then it's been good.

Stanislav is a happy man who finds things simply "good", and that believes that his life is fulfilling is childhood imagination. "Living as one's childhood imagination" may be seen as a personal life philosophy...

Finally, thanks to these three features, imagination plays a main role in what we can call the "melody of our living". (Zittoun et al., 2013) There is a unique style with which each of us deals with the unexpected; the style evolves with time, like our handwriting or painting style, yet there is something which makes it recognizable. Hence, rather than saying human specificities in terms of traits, or inbuilt characteristics, our melodies of living are dynamic – the evolving outcome of our playing and imagining with what life offers.

Conclusion: imagination and developmental trajectories

So, if life is a river that can take many shapes, what can sociocultural psychology tell us? First, I have tried to define notions that allow describing certain dynamics of change. Hence, I have suggested that the lifecourse demands transitions, which themselves question the systemic relation between identity, learning and sense making. Second, using these notions, we can learn to see how to support these dynamics to avoid people's alienation. Often, transitions can be supported by specific settings; learning, when hindered, can be supported when taking in consideration sense making or identity implications; or a sphere of experience's change can be supported through the sense developed in another sphere. Third, I have suggested that what supports the work of transitions in the lifecourse might actually be found in distal experience, and so I have proposed to consider the dynamics of imagination. Imagination is a loop away from the proximal that allows us to turn back to past experience, to connect to alternative ones, or to create new spheres of experience. Imagination supports transitions by exploring what is not yet, or by restoring continuities or integrating the diverse. Fourth, I have suggested that imagination plays more generally a fundamental role in the development of people, and of societies.

Finally, if life can be represented as a river which unfolds, at times full of majesty, at times furious like a mountain torrent, then imagination is a canoe and a transatlantic streamer, or perhaps as submarine, that allows us to move along and through it. Paradoxically, imagination is thus our safest navigation mean in the torrents of our lives.

Notes

1 Zuzana and Stanislav, whom I will present below, are a couple whose life has been documented over twenty years by the Czech documentalist Elena Trestikova, as part of her "Studies of marriages in the 20th Century" – a series of films in which she followed 6 couples married in 1980 under communism in Czechoslovakia, over 20 years, until 2006 (Třeštíkova, 2009; Zittoun, In press, 2013). Concretely, these films present these people in their daily lives, more or less every six months; at these moments, the participant present the camera crew what they do, what they expect or what they hope, and so on. We have transcribed these films, and we use them as data for in-depth case studies, as well as between case comparisons, which can be understood on the background of the cultural-historical context of the end of communism in Czech Republic, which has itself been analysed by social scientists.

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