

## CHAPTER 9

# IMAGINATION AND ITS PLEASURES

Tania Zittoun

*Als das Kind Kind war,  
warf es einen Stock als Lanze gegen den Baum,  
und sie zittert da heute noch.*

Peter Handke, *Lied vom Kindsein* (1986)<sup>1</sup>

I was not a very imaginative child, yet I was discovering the world with intensity: the smell of flowers, the speed of a bike, the pride of climbing in a playground, the tactile experience of book covers and the sound of the cooing pigeons in the courtyard were deep experiences. Early on I became an avid reader; I enjoyed discovering the universes of Innuits, wild wolves, and eagles that books opened for me. These worlds and their inhabitants accompanied me beyond the books. I would soon recreate them in my games, alone or with other children, and in my daydreams; they would nourish my curiosity, leading me to read more scientific literature, inspiring my first school assignments and my first dystopian essays. Later, a slightly bored college student, I discovered cinema at the local picture house, friends introduced me to modern and contemporary art, and I came closer to musicians and artists who, out of formal institutions, improvised together, created concert places, invited artists from afar, organised complex events, and developed a new musical language. Travelling, I met people of various courses of life, and I

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<sup>1</sup> “When the child was a child,  
It threw a stick like a lance against a tree,  
And it quivers there still today.”

(Wenders and Handke 1987; English translation from [https://www.babelmatrix.org/works/de/Handke%2C\\_Peter-1942/Lied\\_Vom\\_Kindsein/en/42791-Song\\_of\\_Childhood](https://www.babelmatrix.org/works/de/Handke%2C_Peter-1942/Lied_Vom_Kindsein/en/42791-Song_of_Childhood)).

heard about my friends' explorations of the world. When I finally started to study psychology and social sciences, wanting to better understand the richness of human experience in society, I discovered that academic research seemed to ignore the vital experiences I had lived and witnessed. Research in learning and development seemed to ignore the fact that it is through our passionate play that we develop interests that will become our life commitments. I wondered: how is it that all the skills, the knowledge, the experience we build with others and alone, in very diverse spheres of experience, mainly away from institutions, seem not to exist in research? And why was psychology so unable to account for the fun parts of growing up – the enthusiasm, the friendship, the playfulness of debating, the excitement of being lost in fiction, the pleasure of exploring real and imaginary worlds?

These questions have accompanied me for many years since, and still support my work. In what follows, I retrace some of the studies they led me to, in collaboration with others, in various places; I will especially highlight the evolution of the theoretical models and metaphors that characterise this trajectory.

### **From transitions to symbolic resources: From triangles to prisms**

As a debutant researcher in social psychology of development in the 1990s (Hinde et al. 1985; Perret-Clermont et al. 1991), under the supportive guidance of Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont in Neuchâtel, I was lucky to be able to engage in two studies which grounded my later work. On the one hand, I was invited to do a case study of a pre-apprenticeship programme that supported the transition of young people with school difficulties into the job market. Here I could for the first time theorise transitions and what supports them, including the institutional setting, and the importance of informal learning to support formal schooling (Zittoun 2004c; 2006). On the other hand, I undertook an analysis of the pedagogical and psychological ideas

implicit in the Jewish tradition of study (Zittoun 2007b). There, I was interested in the role of friendship in interactions, and the way in which the tradition formalised the dialogue one engages with a text, and especially tale-like texts (the *Midrash*), and how the text and this way of dialoguing with it can be a source of knowledge and development.

At that time, we theorised transitions as what follows experienced ruptures, drawing on both the Piagetian notion of conflict, and Erickson's notions of crises (Perret-Clermont and Zittoun 2002; Zittoun and Perret-Clermont 2009). The intuition that people learn not only from informal experiences, but also, more specifically, through their dialogue with fictional texts, became the leading intuition of my PhD (Zittoun 2001). But how to study the role of art and fiction in people's lives? First, I had to expand my theoretical horizon; then in the mid-1990s, I realised that the growing field of cultural psychology offered a suitable frame from which to address the phenomenon of the encounter between the person and her or his cultural world (Bruner 1990; Cole 1996; de Moraes Ramos de Oliveira and Valsiner 1997; Valsiner 1987, 1998). To account for the affective side of the phenomena, I also drew on psychoanalysis. Cultural psychology of a semiotic orientation seemed then to provide a foundation to enable such a theoretical junction (Salvatore and Zittoun 2011; Zittoun 2015). Based on our previous work, I studied a naturally occurring rupture that would lead people to a transition during which they would have to engage in symbolic work: the transition to parenthood, which demands that people choose a name for their child to come. The first names that parents choose can refer to traditions, films, novels and songs, and it was quite likely that these artefacts meant something for them. Based on interviews, I could demonstrate that these young adults seemed to use films, novels or songs as symbolic resources that supported identity transformation, learning and sense-making during the transition to parenthood. I developed an initial model of mind drawing on psychoanalysis and cultural psychology, showing how the specificity of a given text or

artefact, with its structure, its plot, and its semantic fields, can be invested by a person whose affects, experiences and preoccupations might not be fully conscious. These can thus be reflected, find a semiotic form, and be transformed by the very fact of having the experience of reading or listening to music. People can later refer to these experiences: they might experience a song coming to mind, reflect on the relationship between a novel and their life, or feel like a character in a movie. A symbolic resource is thus a discrete cultural element the main function of which is to carry meaning and which requires some imaginary engagement from a person, used in relation to something else, which enables semiotic elaboration (Zittoun 2004, 2004d, 2011).

Between 2001 and 2005, Gerard Duveen and a group of then young researchers in Cambridge, including Alex Gillespie, Flora Cornish and Charis Psaltis, and I stabilised the idea of rupture, transition, and the uses of resources as key developmental processes (Zittoun et al. 2003). We also explored the metaphor of triangles in developmental psychology (Zittoun et al. 2007). With Gerard and later with Jaan Valsiner at Clark University, I further pursued the theorisation and analysis of transitions on the basis of the experiences of young adults' uses of symbolic resources such as films, novels, and the arts (Zittoun 2006b, 2007c, 2013). In dialogue with Valsiner's work, I tried to define a model of the 'architecture of subjectivity'. I could now formalise the idea of a semiotic prism (Zittoun 2004b) to account for the processes by which people turn a cultural element, with its social meaning, into personal sense, in interaction with real or imaginary others (Figure 9.1).

In collaboration with a psychoanalyst friend, Uri Peter Trier, we engaged in a joint analysis of his life trajectory, showing how something very unique, which I then called "interiority", develops through a person's uses of various resources in subsequent ruptures and transitions throughout the course of a life (Zittoun 2007). Having shown this, I could then return to one of my initial questions: why is it that people's most important symbolic resources were

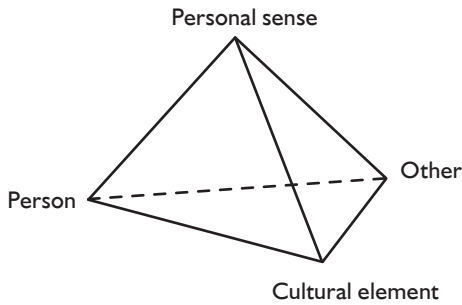


Figure 9.1. Semiotic prism

almost never found at school? Now back in Switzerland, Michèle Grossen and I studied the conditions under which young people meet cultural elements at school, which may invite them, or not, to use these elements as symbolic resources. We also studied the circulation of sense across spheres of experience in and out of school. This enabled us to highlight the modalities of the social frame that the teacher established with students, and the nature of the interpersonal dynamics of trust and recognition that can be conducive to personal sense-making in learning, and with it, to using texts as symbolic resources (Grossen et al. 2012; Zittoun 2014; Zittoun and Grossen 2012). Having done this, I felt it was important to relocate these experiences in the course of a life, and also to expand my understanding of the psychological dynamics underlying uses of symbolic resources.

### From symbolic resources to dynamics of mind: Vectors and movements

It is quite likely that young people's engagement in art and fiction grow from earlier interests, and that these will also have consequences for their future development. I started to approach the development of a person's uses of symbolic resources throughout their lifecourses in two ways (Zittoun 2003; 2009; 2012). First, through reconstructive interviews, I was able to show how people's

interests in specific stories or objects, mainly shared with others, progressively evolve from childhood, grow more complex with time, and become preferred domains of investment, or life themes, or thematic engagement. Hence, for instance, a young woman's interest in nice dresses on painted dancers as a child transformed with time, and generalised into an interest in the visual arts and fiction (Zittoun 2010). The prism model showed its limits: one had to imagine it as in constant evolution, whereby the dynamic uniting a person, an object, and others, needed to be conceived as permanently reforming, or morphing into new forms: objects replace each other, important people succeed each other, the depth and modalities of sense making become more complex, etc. How can one represent such permanently evolving systems?

Second, Alex Gillespie, colleagues from our Cambridge group and I started to work on longitudinal data (Gillespie and Zittoun 2010; Zittoun and Gillespie 2012). Analysing a young woman's war diary enabled us to capture a person's externalisation in real time over five years (Gillespie et al. 2008; Zittoun et al. 2008, 2012). I similarly used longitudinal documentaries to study people's changes and continuities over time (Zittoun 2016, 2015b; Zittoun and de Saint-Laurent 2015). This led me to formulate a model of the diverse spheres of experience in which people engage, and the complex relationships one sphere of experience can have with another. At times people live them as separate, at times they transfer experience from one sphere to the other; they can draw on the stability of some spheres in order to accept changes in others, or some local experiences can trigger radical reconfigurations of many more experiences. Change and development could thus be catalysed by ruptures, but not only; new conducts rather seem to emerge in much more dynamic, non-linear and unpredictable ways. Geometrical models seemed to be unable to account for such dynamic and systemic processes, and so I started to be interested in more organic models and metaphors, more apt at capturing such dynamics. Thus, I proposed for instance a "star" model (Figure 9.2), which was conceived as an ever-evolving field of

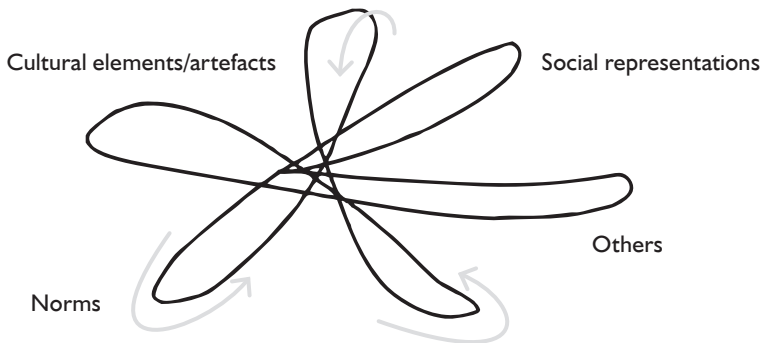


Figure 9.2. Star-shaped model

forces organised by vectors of various valences, at the heart of which the person's fundamentally dialogical experience takes place, and which can lead to novel and unpredictable emerging conducts (Zittoun 2012b, 2013b, 2014b). But then how can we further qualify this dialogical movement of mind, and the unpredictable and creative nature of human experience? With non-linear, more dynamic models in mind, it was now possible to propose a response.

### From the lifecourse to imagination: Spheres and loops

In 2008, Jaan Valsiner kindly invited me to join a team of six in Luxembourg who became co-authors of *Human Development in the Life-course: Melodies of Living* (Zittoun et al. 2013). Following the intuition that not only 'what-is', but also 'what-could-be' plays an important role in human life, we collected literary material that enabled us to show the importance of imagination in living. On a theoretical level, we found theoretical support in classical literature, among which were Vygotsky's texts; yet in this joint book, imagination remained one developmental dynamic among others. However, thanks to this collaboration, I became quite convinced that imagination played a core role in people's lives. Imagination could be seen

as an integrative concept, designating dynamics that take place in and across spheres of experience, invested at different moments in life, for example play and daydream in childhood, memory and the examination of possibilities later on. This revealed some of the key processes that occur when experiencing ruptures, and finally enabled us to better account for dynamics guided by uses of symbolic resources.

In 2011, as we were working on the book, Michael Cole and Etienne Pelaprat published a paper on imagination as gap-filling (Pelaprat and Cole 2011). I decided to respond to this paper in collaboration with Frederic Cerchia, who had studied metaphors in children (Cerchia 2009; Zittoun and Cerchia 2013). We proposed that rather than gap-filling, imagination could be seen as an expansion of experience. Also in 2011, invited in Copenhagen by Pernille Hviid, I presented a preliminary 'loop model' showing the importance of imagination throughout the lifecourse (Figure 9.3). The positive responses I found there – among which was Morton Niessen's – comforted me in developing the loop model and writing a book on imagination. I started this in 2102, and Alex Gillespie joined me in 2014; we published *Imagination in Human and Cultural Development* in 2016 (Zittoun and Gillespie 2016b). Here we explored imagination in ontogenesis, microgenesis and sociogenesis, proposing a secondary reading of research in human development, learning, interaction and social change. Imagination is defined a temporary disengagement from the here-and-now of a proximal sphere of experience, to explore past, future and alternative spheres of experience. It is represented as a looping movement of mind, following a sequence in which some event triggers the person's disengagement from the proximal sphere of experience, then engages in exploring distal experiences using a wide range of resources including symbolic ones, before reengaging in the proximal experience. We were able to show that such a looping movement always modifies the person's experience, in more or less durable, more or less collective ways.

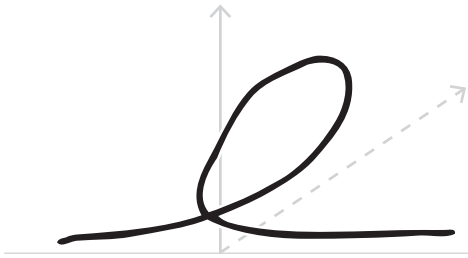


Figure 9.3. Loop of imagination

In parallel, we continued to explore the role of imagination in the lifecourse (Zittoun and Valsiner 2016). We were thus able to show the importance of distal spheres of experience, and of what is imagined in decisions made after ruptures during the lifecourse, especially in periods of social transformation. What people imagine throughout their lives can thus both lead to the creation of radical new proximal spheres of experience – as when long-term hobbies and interests guide professional reinvention after a social crisis (Zittoun 2016, 2017b; Zittoun and de Saint-Laurent 2015) – as well as leading to fundamental transformations of people’s understandings of themselves, the world they live in, and what possible lives they can make come true (Gillespie and Zittoun 2015; Zittoun and Gillespie 2015).

Imagination is thus conceived as dynamic movement, taking place during the lifecourse, itself modelled as a configuration of systemically related spheres of experience. The disengagement from a proximal sphere of experience can be triggered by internal or external causes, one of which can be the experience of rupture. Imagination, which occurs as disengagement, is thus conceived as a process of semiotic distancing drawing on a wide range of semiotic resources, a distancing that can be seen as deploying along three vectors. Only one is vertical, that is, based on generalisation; the two others are temporal, given its importance in people’s sense of continuity; the third is defied by growing implausibility. Imagination as

experience thus always includes semiotic work – a reorganisation of past experiences and available semiotic material, together with the creation of new semiotic constructs – some of it being evanescent, the rest persistent, either as distal spheres or immediately guiding conducts when the person reengages in the proximal sphere. Imagination, because it creates the possible, or brings about new modes of seeing or understanding, can thus lead to transformations within and across spheres of experience, and also to radical reorganisation of one's configuration of sphere of experience, eventually also leading to further ruptures.

Imagination thus theorised seemed to designate a core process of human development understood in open, dynamic systemic terms (Zittoun et al. 2020). We thus had to define it in relation to other, closely related, phenomena: creativity, in which imagination leads to new forms that are socially acknowledged (Zittoun and Gillespie 2016a; Zittoun and Glăveanu 2018); fantasy, which designates the less intentional, more evanescent dynamic of imagining at the periphery of consciousness (Zittoun 2017; Zittoun and Cabra 2020); or memory, which can be theorised as imagination of the past, a vision fully compatible with recent views on the dynamic nature of remembering (de Saint-Laurent and Zittoun 2018; Zittoun 2020). We also expanded this study to larger-scale phenomena, exploring the link between personal and collective imagination, by which social change is most likely to occur (Hawlina et al. 2020; Zittoun 2018b; Zittoun and Gillespie 2018), and to geographical mobility, where it offers a new key to understanding migration, immobility, or the transformation of places within transnational dynamics (Cangià and Zittoun 2020; Pedersen and Zittoun 2022; Zittoun 2020a).

Having captured the fundamental role of imagination, it was perhaps possible to come back to some of my initial questions: why and how can works of fiction be so life-changing (Stenner and Zittoun 2020; Zittoun 2018a, 2021b; Zittoun and Rosenstein 2018; Zittoun and Stenner 2021), how does a child's imaginary world become

a vital experience (Zittoun 2021), and how can these imaginary experiences have a lasting guiding force on human development (Zittoun 2020b)?

### **From imagination to dynamic patterns: Back to pleasure**

So, how can we account for the fact that people develop unique interests as they play, climb on hills, celebrate parties, and read novels, across their real and imaginary experiences? For this, I needed to better understand how the person develops in a certain material and symbolic environment. With time, colleagues and I built more complex case studies to capture, as sociocultural psychology invites us to do, development as transaction between people and their changing worlds, and to identify sociogenetic, microgenetic and ontogenetic phenomena: with lawyers, we examined the changing imagination in the lives of people going through the institutional procedure of asking for Swiss citizenship (Di Donato et al. 2020; Zittoun 2017c); with migration scholars, we wondered how people who have to move repeatedly for professional reasons start to imagine their lives in new ways (Zittoun et al. 2018, 2022; Zittoun and Levitan 2019). Encouraged by an anthropologist friend, I engaged in the case study of a hill, where I could systematically explore how collective history creates the semiotic fabric in which people's lives unfold, and how these lives are equally guided and shaped by the symbolic and the material specificity of a place. I also proposed that patterns emerge through the unique dynamics uniting individual's trajectories, their imaginations and their daily practices – across proximal and distal spheres of experience – as they move through geographic and symbolic spaces (Zittoun 2019). This project also accompanied a group reflection in which we thematised dialogical case studies (Marková et al. 2020).

This, I believe, sets a triple program for future studies which I continue to develop in dialogue with many colleagues. First, our past work suggests an empirical strategy for the construction of complex

case studies in sociocultural psychology: what each person imagines, and how, depends on her or his own engagements, as well as on the complex guidance of the surrounding world and the unique synthesis each of us constantly operates. To document such guidance, we rely increasingly on ethnographic methods, which we develop in collaboration with other social scientists (Zittoun et al. 2023), whether to document the life of people on a remote island (Pedersen 2021; Pedersen and Zittoun 2022), or the degree of freedom of old people in retirement homes (Zittoun and Grossen 2012). Second, these theoretical developments call for more careful longitudinal studies of what develops through life. This invites us to take a closer look at people's thematic engagements, and their dynamic patterns, which can be seen as emerging in childhood (Cabra 2021a, 2021b), and probably develop throughout people's lives (Hviid 2020; Zittoun 2022a), which we now study through longitudinal studies (Zittoun and Baucal 2021; Zittoun, Gillespie and Bernal Marcos 2023). For this, we still need to improve our theoretical models and metaphors, which need to be dynamic, complex and powerful so as to account for the richness of living (Campill and Valsiner 2023; Zittoun 2021b; Zittoun and Gillespie 2020). And third, these recent studies invite me to come back to the initial questions that started this enquiry: if one really wants to account for people's embodied experiences of moving through complex material, geographical environments and imaginary landscapes, we need to redefine our models of the psyche in complex and dynamic ways (Zittoun 2022b; 2023) – in dialogue with authors of the past, and with our friends and colleagues in the present.

This line of sociocultural psychological investigation was triggered by my curiosity about people and their lives, and the surprise of finding out that what I believed were core human experiences – playfulness, intense dialogues, fiction, discovery – were not given adequate prominence in psychology. Thirty years later, I realise that these experiences were missing, perhaps because there was another, more fundamental, aspect that was ignored by most models of the

psyche I could find: in psychology, almost no model gave space to the fact that learning, and especially thinking, can be a highly pleasurable experience.

So, here we are, perhaps after having theorised a variety of experiences that can be joyful and pleasurable – learning through institutions, reading fiction, imagining – and what can make them difficult, painful or sad. It is time to ask how psyche itself can be conceived so as to account not only for the centrality of affects (Valsiner 2020), but also for the fundamentally pleasurable experience of thinking and imagining, alone or, mainly, with others (Zittoun 2024).

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