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Thematic engagements: Affects and learning in older age

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we propose a sociocultural perspective to consider affects in older age. The psychology of learning throughout the whole life course, including in the life of older adults, suggest that affects play an important role. However, developmental psychology has paid little attention to affects in learning and development, and even less to these aspects in older age. We believe that it is important to examine affects in older age because of their centrality in the lifecourse; but how to account for them? We propose the notion of *thematic engagement* to highlight the role of affects in older persons' learning and development, and to designate transversal and pluri-thematic interests across activities and domains of knowledge, which enable us to show that some topics, domains or interests become more important than others for a given person across time. We base our claims on a longitudinal study of older people engaging in different activities at home, in their neighbourhood, as well as in a daycare centre for older people, and provide three dialogical exemplars. We finally highlight some theoretical and empirical implications of our proposition.

Ageing takes place in all sorts of places. We grow old at home, on a sofa, on a train to work, in a hospital bed or sitting on the floor surrounded by grandchildren. Throughout life, we encounter new experiences, and leave others behind – we learn to ride a bicycle and forget how to play chess. We also discover new places, learn to rely on others to support us for some activities, and we become able to do others on our own. Moving to new flats, relying on a friendly neighbour for grocery shopping, or walking in the snow to get to the pharmacy, are ways in which we live our everyday life, but also collective and unique ways in which we are growing old. Hence, ageing can be seen as a process involving different forms of learning and development made both of losses and novel emergences (P. B. Baltes, 1997). Throughout various experiences, we think and feel in different ways. We become annoyed at the freezing floors when trying to walk down a slope, experience joy at the sight of a pink sunset after a difficult day or cry at the loss of a dear pet. Affective dynamics thus also constitute a core aspect of experiences, learning and development in older people.

The psychology of learning and development through the lifecourse, including in the life of older adults, has shown that affects play an important role in people's lives. However, developmental psychology still pays little attention to affects in learning and development, and even less to these aspects in older age. We believe that it is important to examine affects in learning and development in older age because of their centrality in human experience (Brown & Reavey, 2015; Clot, 2015; Fonagy et al., 2005; Muller Mirza, 2016; Valsiner, 2020), and along the lifecourse (Zittoun, 2024); but how to account for them? In this paper, we adopt a sociocultural perspective to consider affects in older age. More specifically, we propose the notion of *thematic engagement* to highlight the role of affects in older persons' learning. We will define thematic engagements as transversal interests running across activities and domains of knowledge for a given person; such a definition will enable us to explain why some experiences take more importance, for a given person, over time. We base our claims on a longitudinal study of older people engaging in different activities at home, in their

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neighbourhood, as well as in a daycentre for older people. We illustrate our proposition with three examples, and thus hope to show how a better inclusion of affects enriches our understanding of learning and development in older age.

1. Affects and meaning in the psychology of older age

Psychology of learning and development in older age (Hall, 1922) has been expanding in various directions since its inclusion in psychology of the lifecourse (Baltes & Lang, 1997; Baltes & Mayer, 1999). Next to the dominant cognitive approach to ageing, a critical line has developed to question some of its assumptions (Gergen & Gergen, 2010; Stenner et al., 2011; Woodward, 2002). Other studies in dialogue with the social sciences and especially geography have approached ageing in context via more ecological or situated approaches (Bigonnesse & Chaudhury, 2022; Peace et al., 2007). However, these approaches do not fully account for the experience of older persons in their environment: how do they feel about it, and what does it mean to them?

Interested in meaning and affects, we turn to three lines of research that address affects in older age. First, cognitive approaches to human development in older age have shown the apparently paradoxical fact that old people usually have a positive well-being (Carstensen, 2019; Kunzmann et al., 2000), which seems to be associated to positive meaning making (Dittmann-Kohli, 1990). Other studies have shown that results in cognitive and memory tasks are simply better when the topic at hand is associated to positive or meaningful experience (Hess, 2022; Hess et al., 2022; Mather & Carstensen, 2005; Whatley et al., 2022). All these studies concur to experimentally demonstrate the importance of meaningful and positive experience in older person's lives, positive affects having a motivational role (Carstensen, 2021). Second, narrative approaches to ageing show the central role of meaning making in older age, or more specifically, the importance of keeping making sense of one's experience, mainly through narration, in a way that maintains an opening to the future (Freeman, 2011; Gubrium, 2011; Kenyon et al., 2011). Third, psychoanalytical approaches examining unconscious experiences and their affective counterpart in old and very old persons show the importance of a drive, or desire, in the process of ageing and of maintaining an orientation to life. More than these two first approaches, the psychoanalytic one considers affects as having a dynamic and relational nature, thus accompanying experiences and allowing people to invest others, objects and ideas, to different degrees (Le Gouès, 2000; Quinodoz, 2008, 2010; Villa, 2010). Hence, these three approaches suggest that meaning and affects take a growing importance in the development of older person; it organises everyday life and supports people's orientation to the future, even though future perspectives may actually be limited. However, these approaches tend to consider the person in isolation, outside the material and sociocultural location of their everyday lives. This is why, although we acknowledge the contributions of these lines of work, we turn to a sociocultural approach to ageing, which tries to integrate a lifecourse perspective of development together with an understanding of the material and social context, as well as people's experiences and dynamic of sense-making.

2. "Thematic engagement": approaching affects from a sociocultural perspective

Sociocultural psychology has invited us to consider learning and development in their material and sociocultural context, as lifelong processes, occurring through and across situated activities (Grossen et al., 2021; Hviid, 2022; Valsiner & Lawrence, 1997; Zittoun & Baucal, 2021). This implies that learning and development are often best understood not only as located within one isolated person, but rather, as a dynamic involving a person as part of a system or a network (Cole, 2019; Engeström & Sannino, 2016; Perret-Clermont, 2015; Perret-Clermont, Pontecorvo, et al., 2004; Wertsch & Kanner, 1992).

Sociocultural developmental psychology is currently manifesting a growing interest in theorizing and studying the development of older persons (Ferrig, 2018; Valsiner, 2017; Zittoun et al., 2013). Authors have started to identify the specificities of development in older age and particularly, the role of the social and material environment (Engeström et al., 2015; Grossen et al., 2020; Zittoun, Cabra, Gfeller, & Grossen, 2024; Zittoun, Grossen, & Tarrago Salamin, 2021).

In addition, sociocultural psychology has also expanded so as to account for affects in human experience, in social interactions (Salvatore & Freda, 2011), as well as in relation to the immediate material environment (Valsiner, 2020) and in interactions with cultural elements (Zittoun, 2014, 2022), or with the semiosphere (Neuman, 2009b; Salvatore et al., 2021). Inspired by psychoanalytic perspectives, these authors have considered affects as a form of valence accompanying meaning-making dynamics. However, sociocultural psychology has not yet studied affective dynamics involved in learning and development in older adults. Let us now have a closer look at this approach, and the role of affects in it.

A sociocultural perspective in psychology assumes the interdependence between person and environment. From this perspective, learning can be defined as the process through which a person starts to be able to make a new use of an element, or to establish new relations between elements as a result of her actions and of the intervention of another person who has some intentionality and mediates this process – a ternary relationship (Perret-Clermont, Carugati, & Oates, 2004; Vygotsky, 1934). In contrast, development designates such construction in relation to other aspects of the person's life and its possibilities for transformation (Valsiner, 2007). Learning and development have been defined at the level of the person, dyads, and systems (Engeström & Sannino, 2016; Witherington & Boom, 2019; Zittoun & Perret-Clermont, 2009).

To highlight the role of affects in a given person's learning process, we propose to approach it from a double perspective: on the one hand, we need to consider the person and her subjectivity as part of her life story; and on the other, we need to understand the role of affects in different domains of her current life. Thus, we first suggest that when considering a specific interaction between a person, an object and a mediation by another person, we need to understand what each person brings to the relation – in terms of semiotic but also affective aspects, and what it is that they may learn or develop through the relationship (Muller Mirza, 2016; Muller Mirza et al., 2014; Perret-Clermont, 1993). Approaches in cultural psychology which focus on learning in situated activities (Engeström & Sannino, 2016) usually pay little attention to the development of the person; those that consider the person's trajectory or her learning history

(Bourgeois & Nizet, 2005; Rochex, 1998) usually fail to include the role of affective dynamics (Cabra, 2021).

Adopting a sociocultural perspective enables us to approach affective dynamics through a semiotic approach, combining developmental claims with psychoanalytic propositions (Neuman, 2009a; Salvatore & Freda, 2011). More specifically, in his seminal work, Jaan Valsiner has defined a semiotic cultural psychology that focuses on the role of signs in mind (Valsiner, 1987, 2021). It has inspired studies examining the ways in which culture guides the person in constructing her world and suggested that such process is better apprehended at the level of a smallest unit of analysis: that of signs – things that designate other things for a given mind (Peirce, 1894). Mind and human activities are thus considered to be enabled by semiotic mediation (Vygotsky, 1987, 1931), resulting from the internalization of signs into mind, traces of past experiences and their combination and creation into new syntheses (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). But signs do not emerge in mind free of affects. When a person remembers a situation or thinks about a past day, there are always affects associated to what appears in mind. Thus, authors have further tried to define the role of affects in semiotic dynamics by considering that signs emerge in mind always accompanied by a certain form of affective investment, and that there are different degrees of investment of semiotic elements (Neuman, 2009a; Salvatore & Freda, 2011; Zittoun, 2006). Complementarily, Hviid and Villadsen have proposed the notion of engagement (Hviid, 2008, 2016; Hviid & Villadsen, 2014). Engagements are defined as “situated zones of potential development. They unite potential interests of the child with certain aspects of the environment. Like interests, engagements do not stem from inside but are created by the child in the situation she experiences” (Hviid, 2008, p. 184). This idea can be traced throughout life, from childhood to older age. The notion of engagement, understood as situated zones, allows us to consider the social and material environment as well as the affective investment of activities and situations.

Drawing on these perspectives, we propose to approach affective dynamics in learning situations in the life of older persons by integrating the notion of engagement into the semiotic approach to development. We thus define affects, following the semiotic perspective, as investments accompanying semiotic dynamics; they therefore play a key role in the development of people's engagements. This enables us to distinguish a specific type of affective learning in people's lives. More specifically, we pose that people can develop *thematic engagements* (Zittoun, 2022). We define “thematic engagement” as a form of generalized organization of knowledge connected to long-standing interests across domains of interests and contexts (Akkerman & Bakker, 2019; Engel, 2021). “Thematic engagements” refer to the person's preferential interests, or selective affective relations to certain themes or activities. Thematic engagements emerge and stabilize along the person's lifecourse, where curiosity may turn into interests, and slowly evolve into engagements. In addition, thematic engagements are constructed in and through our relationships with significant others (Engel, 2021; Hviid, 2015; Zittoun, 2024). Hence, at a given moment, a thematic engagement may run as transversal red thread, across domains, and spheres of experience, and indifferently in formal, informal domains of knowledge, or across them. The word “thematic” thus stresses the situated and content-related anchor that characterises a given engagement, although it goes beyond specific domains of competence. From such semiotic perspective, the different elements that compose an engagement are read in terms of their semiotic value, that is, in relation to the affective investment which accompanies their emergence.

In the remaining of this paper, we will show that the notion of thematic engagement is particularly fruitful to understand learning and development in older adults, the way in which they participate in different activities of their daily life, and their affective valence. As people have lived a long life and had many different experiences, in different situations and with different persons, this notion also highlights the possible reasons why people seem more interested in some activities than in others. Hence, these choices and interests would thus be due to a specific thematic engagement, which brings people to perceive them in relation to earlier affective investments.

To ground this proposition, we now describe the general context of the study from which these ideas emerge, its methodology, and present three examples.

3. HomAge to study the development of older persons in their environments

The propositions in this paper are based on the work carried out within the frame of the project HomAge, acronym for “Modes of housing in the development of older persons”. Defined as a regional case study at the scale of a Swiss Canton, it examines the transformation of new policies of housing for older persons. We have retraced the genealogy of these policies and their implementation on the institutional, interpersonal, and personal levels (Gfeller et al., 2021; Gfeller & Zittoun, 2023). These new policies aim at supporting the capacity of older persons to maintain an independent and meaningful life at home as long as possible, by providing new forms of housing, coordinated networks of homecare, daycentres and support groups (Zittoun, Cabra, Gfeller, & Grossen, 2024); here, we focus mainly on the perspectives of older persons.

The study as a whole is defined as a case-study and uses an overall qualitative and dialogical approach (Cornish, 2020; Marková et al., 2020). Consequently, we engaged in ethnographic work, including participant observations and paper-pen note taking, informal discussions, and formal repeated interviews with selected older participants, in institutional settings such as a daycare centre, at home, and in everyday situations, such as cafés and informal gatherings. This dialogical perspective implies a collaborative aspect with the field; not only did we keep dialoguing about our findings within the research team, but also with the various stakeholders and social actors we were meeting along our study, via informal gathering, as well as more formal events.

In this paper, we draw on observations and repeated interviews with 13 participants, aged between 74 and 92, who were observed and interviewed by the two authors, sometimes together, otherwise separately, at home and in a daycare centre for older people. When people were in group situation, each researcher focused on the participation of one or two target persons (Cabra, 2020, 2021). Because of the diversity of the data – paper-pen observations of interactions, recorded and transcribed interviews, ethnographic notes – we engaged in a collaborative analysis (Cornish et al., 2013), reading through the notes, sharing experiences, and progressively identifying emerging themes, as well as observations corresponding to our conceptual framework. On the one hand, we analysed what was said in situated interactions, identifying moments of particular affective intensity, and on the other hand, we engaged in a biographical

reconstruction of the person's trajectory (Rosenthal, 1993).

Indeed, drawing on our theoretical framework, we consider that thematic engagements can be identified in a person's externalisation. From a semiotic perspective, these are multimodal – they include how people speak and what they say, how they move, but also their relation to clothes and objects, which all are likely to accompany sense-making dynamics. We thus identify invested semantic fields in the discourse – as when a person uses more often nature-related terms in different topics of conversation. – or dominant interests manifested by the person across spheres of experience and activities – such as always being interested in understanding “how things function” regardless of the topic, verbally or in practice. Thematic engagements work as attractors in people's and groups' daily activities, and appear thus as red thread that brings continuity and stability across activities. Consequently, for each target person, following our theoretical framework, our analysis focused on the identification of emotionally invested semantic fields and affectively charged semiotic networks, which required us to adopt a more interpretative stance (Cabra, 2021; Zittoun, 2019). Overall, our approach was abductive – moving between theory and data and back (Reichert, 2014; Zittoun, 2017; Zittoun et al., 2022). In this paper, we chose to present three examples which, because of their diversity, are particularly representative of what we call thematic engagement. Participants all gave their informed consent to be part of the study, and in case of doubt, their carers were also consulted (in agreement with the University's ethical board, we excluded from the sample people who had lost their capacity of discernment at the start of the study). Data presented here was anonymised and names and significant information have been changed.

4. Thematic engagement: understanding affective dynamics in learning and development

The three examples presented here can be considered as “dialogical exemplars”: although they are distinct, each of them conveys aspects of the dialogical complexity and totality of the phenomena we wish to capture, and they may in turn enter in dialogue with further examples (Zadeh & Cabra, 2020); presenting three complementary examples shows the presence and variation of thematic engagements.

The first example highlights the emergence and evolution of a thematic engagement in the life trajectory of a person.

4.1. Creating and growing at home

Jean-Maxime is a 74-years-old man who lives in a family house shared with other older people in a small town. He appears to have developed a thematic engagement related to creating things, starting from a marking youth memory, and running across his current domains of experience. As a child, he narrates, he lost all his hair at the age of six; he consequently learned to deal with it and not to suffer from mockeries of his school mates through humour. During his working life, he worked in the military and in politics, and was very involved in religious institutions. He believes that people can learn ways of communicating what they want about themselves; he calls them “communicational strategies”. Hence, before each research interview, he thus prepared points to discuss, and tried to lead the interviews on this line; when having lunch with his neighbours, he adopts other sets of communicational strategies which, he explains, apply better to this form of situation. “Communicative strategies” thus enable to orient with some distance, the unfolding of various social interactions. Jean-Maxime also told us a story that we interpreted to be at the core of his way of creating a distanced relationship to reality and to others. He thus explained how, after losing his hair, he had to wear a wig and a hat. One day, as he was participating in a school theatre play, he removed his hat on stage; the wig came off with it. Everybody saw he was bald and made fun of him. There again, he had to learn to laugh at it – humour being his resources to do so. Hence, it seems, both the use of humour and the capacity to consciously chose among possible communicative strategies require a form of distancing from the here and now from specific social situation, initially developed to move away from a painful situation. In other words, communicational strategies and humour appear as resources that Jean-Maxime uses to take some distance and create another version of himself in a diversity of situations (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2010). What supports such reading is that since he retired, Jean-Maxime spends a lot of time in his workshop, where he constructs theatre plays with cardboard boxes; he also makes castles by cutting and gluing the pieces together, and he imagines how they may work on stage. Such activities, requiring imagining alternative futures and new possible worlds, can indeed be read as an extension of his ways of distancing and creating new versions of himself, still materially mediated, this time on a less social, and more playful and imaginary plane (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). In addition, Jean-Maxime is also fascinated by what technology makes possible: he has a 3D printer with which he designs and prints – creates - objects. Finally, he recently learning to draw caricatures. Caricatures imply a specific technique of drawing non-realistic characters, enhancing aspects of their faces or bodies which have gone through the interpretation of the human eye. Again, it allows to create a version of the people and places which is not direct, but mediated, distanced and playful.

Over time, then it seems, Jean-Maxime's thematic engagement oriented toward *creation* (Glăveanu, 2017) – using various resources for creating new versions of self, new communicative styles, new objects or possible worlds. Although such activities were initially anchored in affectively difficult social situations, they later moved through a diversity of social and more private situations, now imbued with more positive affective value, related to humour and playfulness. In addition, it appears, pursuing such thematic engagement, Jean-Maxime became interested and invested in a large variety of activities along his trajectory, in which he keeps learning new skills and developing knowledge and expertise.

Let us now turn to the second example, which beings to the fore the social nature of thematic engagements.

4.2. Writing one's love to nature

Pierre-Alain was almost 90 years old when we met; he just had started writing his autobiography at a daycare centre for older

people, with the help of the head of the centre. In the past, Pierre-Alain had been a renowned academic for many years; he had led different teams and written many books. He describes himself as having been “the boss” at work, and “the man of the house” at home. Now, with a rapidly advancing dementia, his situation at home with his wife became increasingly difficult, reason why he started attending this daycentre. At first, he did not want to attend, and had arguments and fights with the staff and other beneficiaries in the centre. There, following the motto of the newly created daycentre, to identify personalized and meaningful activities for each beneficiary, the head of the centre offered to help him writing his autobiography. In this case, the activity fulfilled a double function, and thus corresponded to his interests: enabling a dialogue between past and present, such writing may support the establishment of continuity in his life, whole also becoming support for his memory (Zittoun & Grossen, 2012). In order to understand how this took place, we considered Pierre-Alain's past interests and engagements: we thus paid attention to the things he told us he enjoyed doing. On the one hand, he referred to positions in which he repeatedly found himself and that he invested: being a boss, head of others, dealing with writing and directing. We also were attentive, on the other hand, to the content of his affective investment: he told us he loved nature, in his childhood and later on, in adulthood. He was an amateur ornithologist and observer of plants, before turning these interests into his lifework and profession. Both elements, his relationship to writing and his love of nature, as affectively invested, are thematic engagements. In the centre, these could be identified and further transformed thanks to the mediation and support of the head of the centre.

A closer look to the situation shows that the writing activity proposed by the head of the institution was very specific, linked to this man's unique biography and his two thematic engagements – writing and nature. First, as continuation to his writing skills, but also to how he would feel in his professional social position and at home, he could experience being “the boss” (i.e., telling his life story) in a way as he could find himself again writing, being helped by members of a “team” (i.e., the head of the institution). Second, with the book, he reminisced about his interest in nature, in birds and plants; he could insert pictures he had made in the book, and comment on why these were important to him; the book supported his affective investment in nature. In addition, the book functioned as an external support for him as he as progressively losing his memory. Indeed, after completion of the autobiography, he would walk around the day centre with his book under his arm, using it as a mediating resource to speak about himself; it is as if his memory had become externalized or distributed (Mäkitalo et al., 2017). Altogether, the book-writing activity played an important role in his trajectory; in effect, from there on, he quitted his earlier often aggressive position, and started to be interested in other things and to participate in collective activities at the centre, such as gardening. Interestingly, gardening can be read as being consistent with his earlier interest in nature, yet as new, actualisable and socially shared activity, now under new form - it is thus a way to pursue his thematic engagement with nature.

Hence, through this personalized activity, Pierre-Alain learned and developed. First, he co-created a book and used learned it as a form of external memory, thus a new form of remembering adjusted to his memory loss. Second, once it was done, and also put to the fore the importance of his engagement to nature, Pierre-Alain was able to open new activities such as gardening, thus, reorganizing his relationship to himself, to others at the centre, and to his environment – a form of development.

This example thus highlights how a thematic engagement is not only a subjective or individualised trait, but always also a socially shared and culturally mediated dynamic. For Jean-Maxime like for Pierre-Alain, it developed along one's biography, and one's history of relationships. At the daycentre, for Pierre-Alain, it is the work of the head of the centre, sensitive to what mattered to the beneficiary, and his support in using a instituted activity – to write one's biography – that participated to the reactivation of his thematic engagement; and it is then a collective activity – gardening, to which many professionals and beneficiary participate – that supports its transformation toward learning and development.

Not only can thematic engagements be collectively defined and supported; they also manifest in collective activities. The last example highlights affects and learning, and thus thematic engagements, in a group situation.

4.3. *Thematic engagements in remembering*

The third example considers a group activity taking also place at a day centre for older people. One morning, as people were waiting for lunchtime in the garden in front of the building, the staff proposed, as a structured shared activity, a memory game. It is an activity aimed at supporting learning in older people – it is expected to stimulate and train the participants' memory so as to avoid its loss. The professional picks a domain of the world, such as animals or trees, writes it on the board, and each participant has to propose, in turn, a word belonging to that group. We focused on the participation of two older persons, who, unlike others, actively participated and seemed to enjoy the activity: Anna, who grew up and lived all her life in a farm, and Britta, a former schoolteacher. Interestingly, during this task, Anna mainly proposed names of animal farms: duck, cow, horse, sheep. In contrast, Britta proposed difficult animal names such as dromedary or platypus. Why were Anna and Britta both thinking hard and engaged in the activity, while other participants were not?

We suggest that behind the memory stimulation game, there may be something more meaningful taking place, that could be akin to what has been coined “vital memories” – memory of particular affective significance for a given person, due to her life course (Reavey & Brown, 2019; Whatley et al., 2022). As it is well known, people do not approach learning activities as a neutral exercise; they engage in them by making sense of them (Bruner & Haste, 1987; Rochex, 1998). In addition, older person perform better in memory task if these are affectively relevant in older age (Whatley et al., 2022). Hence, in this socially shared situation of a mundane memory task, both Anna and Britta find a way to engage elements related to their life trajectory, and especially, their past practices, domains of expertise, interests and affects. Here, thus, the personal sense each of them confers to the task seems to have been affectively invested over the course of life, that is, corresponds to their thematic engagements. In other terms, the two women's participation can be seen as occasion to anchor the thematic engagements they had developed in life, including affects that accompanied Anna's life in the farm,

maybe the memories of it, as well as Britta's days working as a schoolteacher. When a present activity allows making a link to such affective experiences, the participants seem to be immersed in a deeper way in the task at hand, than others who simply respond to the task.

The three dialogical exemplars each illustrate some core dynamics related to thematic engagements, seen as manifesting the role of affects in learning and development. The first situation illustrates a thematic engagement related to creation that evolves across time, social situations, and domains of experience. It invites us to think of learning beyond specific domains and without compartmentalizing it in formal or informal learning, or reducing to the idea of "transfer"; rather, it suggests that there are fluid dynamics of sense-making that enable to join diverse range of experience in time and space which are subjectively experienced as related (Akkerman & Bakker, 2019; Grossen et al., 2012). The second situation puts to the fore the social nature and culturally mediated nature of thematic engagements. We examined a personalized activity proposed to one of the beneficiaries, writing his autobiography with the help of the head of a day centre, which corresponded to two thematic engagements, writing and his love for nature. This, in turn, enabled this man to reread his life trajectory, establish a temporality and consistency, and also, externalise his memory; this, we suggest, enabled supported his development and opened up the possibility of engaging in new learning (e.g., relying on an "externalized" memory, gardening, accepting new forms of relationships). Thus, by highlighting what really mattered to him, this socially shared process seems to have enabled Jean-Maxime to accept the losses and changes brought by age, and to engage into transformation (Le Gouès, 2000). The third example brings to the fore the collective nature of affects in learning, showing how the same activity may be diversely apprehended by different persons, given their idiosyncratic thematic engagement, and developmental trajectory. Although it is an activity directed at supporting rather than creating new competences, we consider that it was learning: when the person links a present object, event or activity with her personal trajectory, they have an affective resonance that favours the person's engagement and acceptance of change in their own way.

5. Conclusion

Studying affects in learning and development of older people is challenging, and implies going beyond classic views on ageing as merely a movement toward loss and decline (Gergen & Gergen, 2001; Lieblich, 2014; Quinodoz, 2008; Zittoun & Baucal, 2021). As part of this challenge, we have followed the propositions made in sociocultural psychology which provides a more holistic understanding of older people and their ways of learning and developing.

Conceptually, we proposed to apprehend affects from a semiotic and dynamic perspective. We also anchored our proposition in a perspective which coordinates material, social and contextual aspects of interactions, with personal dynamics in older age (Grossen et al., 2020; Zittoun, Cabra, Gfeller, & Grossen, 2024). We finally linked learning to biographical trajectories and to development. Hence, we have tried to show how a sociocultural approach can enable us to highlight the role of affective dynamics in learning and development in older age.

In this paper, our contribution to the theorization of affect in learning and development is the notion of *thematic engagement*. Thematic engagements are situated forms of interests, anchored forms of psychological recurrence, located at the junction of semiotic and affective elements of our psyche. We then exemplified these propositions by analysing three dialogical exemplars.

The notion of thematic engagement enables us to approach the role of affects in learning and development beyond the idea of individual performance, domain-specific or transversal skills. Rather, it suggests that people develop interests along their life trajectories, some connected to happy events and positive experiences, other anchored in more challenging ones, and that these can become thematic engagements. Interests and thematic engagements are both affective and sociocultural in nature: they are embedded in social relationships and deeply culturally mediated, in their construction as well as in their transformation. The affective nature of these experiences gives them specific salience. In older age, when people move away from their working life, this affective nature may colour and connect diverse daily experiences of learning, as well as new learning commitments, regardless of social or institutional boundaries. Thus, more fundamentally, we suggest that because of their affective nature, thematic engagements may trigger learning processes in a more structural way than simply being related to participating in social activities. Their affective nature may allow making a deep link and help, for example, to maintain certain aspects of a person's memory because of its link to a certain preferred theme or domain of expertise. In that sense, they may thus participate to development.

Empirically, a focus on thematic engagements offers us an entry to identify where affects reside in daily interactions and individual and collective activities, and it invites us to become aware of the fact that these are linked to deeper learning and developmental dynamics. This may give us means to support the thematic engagement of each person within their unique trajectory, and thus, their further learning and development while growing older. Altogether, we hope that the notion of thematic engagements opens new routes for highlighting the roles of affects in learning and development in the lifecourse.

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