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Comments

Transitions as dynamic processes – A commentary



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Introduction

Studies of learning have been paradoxically, and rightly, criticized for being non-developmental, or a-historical. Also, it has taken time and effort for researchers to really take account of the socially, situated components of learning. In this beautiful collection of papers, the editors invite us to take seriously the historical, cultural, situated, and dynamic nature of learning. These papers plunge into the complexities and messiness of schools, relationships to parents, diverse social and cultural settings, or sorts of knowledge. Avoiding dilution, the papers share a common cultural–historical theoretical frame that allows considering the dialectic relationships of various activity settings, together with the demands they make on actors, and how these might correspond, or not, to people's own motives. Finally, what connects the papers is obviously the notion of transition – home-to-school (Hedegaard, Bøttcher, Sanchez-Medina), in the child's development in different settings (Fleer, Ullstadius), in the case of migration (Sanchez-Medina et al.), or the transformation of educational systems (Chaiklin).

The papers give us first an overview of the heuristic power of the cultural–historical framework developed by Marianne Hedegaard (this volume, and Hedegaard & Chaiklin, 2005; Hedegaard, Fleer, Bang, & Hviid, 2008; Hedegaard, 2003) and invite us to give a specific attention to the directionality of the system – that is, what demands a given setting makes on children, and conversely, how children are oriented toward these demands. The evident strength of this tradition is its capacity to highlight the dialectic nature of the processes by which the child or the learning person participates in the creation of his or her social environment, and by which the implied actors and institutions, whether they are aware of it or not, contribute to the creation of the conditions from which the child will feel, think, and act. Such processes can be shown because of three further strengths of this tradition, illustrated across the papers: first, its theoretical anchorage; second, its epistemological choice to consider the child (or the learner's) perspective, and third, following these points, its methodological creativity, which allows researchers to, for example, follow children from home to school and back (see also Hedegaard et al., 2008; Hviid, 2008) or shift activities and motive orientation within the same setting (see Fleer in this collection). Hence, the paradigm is consistent and, thanks to this consistency, opens door for further theoretical developments.

In what follows, I will first underline the interest of the dialectic processes highlighted by the papers; on this basis, I will then question the use and implications of the notion of transition.

A. Dialectical approach to change

In Hedegaard's paper, the temporal horizon is that of the daily moves from home to school and back in the life of young children. We follow Lulu doing some task at home with her mother and siblings, and then at school. An analysis in terms of

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activity settings allows Hedegaard to show how different demands are made on Lulu at home and at school; the latter is clearly oriented toward work (mathematics), family life contains a possible demand toward play, and so Lulu can maintain a play-oriented motive at home; yet doing homework at the home of her good school-friend, she presents a school-like motive orientation.

The question of perspective is even more sensitive when it comes to disabled persons. In her paper that examines the developmental consequences of school–family relations, Bøttcher shows the dramatic implications of dialectic dynamic: two boys with severe cerebral palsy found themselves in equivalent conditions in a special education setting, with extremely contrasting consequences for their developmental trajectories. In one case, the staff included the parents' perspective and knowledge of the child's need and abilities to tailor the educational setting, allowing remarkable learning; in the other case, the parents were not heard and the setting was poorly adjusted to the child's needs and capacity for expression. Hence, the educational settings were differently related to the family settings and the parents' expertise and knowledge about the children; the demands on the second boy were consequently not adjusted to his motive orientations, partly because these were unheard. Interestingly, Bøttcher shows how the first child was able to communicate his dissatisfaction loudly, while the other's expressions were perceived as silent. In the first case, these interpreted motives catalyzed the whole adjustment of the system – pedagogues asking for the mother's expertise, tailored education – while in the other, a growing mismatch between the child's motive orientation and that of the pedagogues took place.

With a different methodological strategy, Sanchez Medina and his colleagues show how the experiences of migrant families of their children's learning at school actually appeared as compatible with the demands of the school, hence perhaps fostering motive orientations in their children that parents considered appropriate. In her microgenetic analysis, Fler beautifully shows how the same activity setting – interacting with an I-Pad – can engage children with different and contrasting activities and associated motive orientations, some playful, others more oriented to learning aspects, and actually allows for rapid “flickering” between these different motive orientations. Ullstadius takes a longitudinal perspective, where she follows mothers' relation to their children's activities, and shows that, if in some cases, there is a progressive adjustment of one to the other – which would be an adjustment in motive orientations – in others, the children's expression are perceived as disruptive – children's motives are seen as contradictory to the demands of the setting, and crises therefore arrive. Finally, at a macro-social level, Chaiklin proposes a subtle model for analyzing different preschool settings, and their evolution in the wider contexts of their societal demands. Hence, from such perspective, preschool programs and activities themselves appear as presenting motives and goals that might correspond to wider historical constraints, and through these, to various people's motive orientations; conversely, the practices emphasized by school might contribute to the development of children, whose orientation might, in turn, substantially contribute to the transformation of these environments.

While these papers all illustrate these dialectical movements between activity settings, and within settings, between goals and motive orientations, or between a setting and its wider institutional and societal setting, they give different attention to the core person involved – the child, or the learner. But how do we have access to the child or the learner's motive orientations? These young participants are never asked directly what they like or how they interpret the situation – which is in many cases impossible. In these papers, motive orientations are deduced or rather inferred from children's verbal statements, from actions they engage in, but also, from non-verbal, embodied modalities of expression. In that sense, all these acts are seen as communicative, or minimally, as externalizing part of the participant's experience – admitting that externalizing can take a wide variety of semiotic modalities (verbal, gestural, postural, etc.) (Abbey, 2007; Josephs & Valsiner, 1998; Kharlamov, 2012; Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003; Musaeus & Brinkmann, 2011; Rodriguez, 2007; Valsiner, 1987, 2006, 2007, 2008). But this then supposes hypotheses about the children's psyche – what they feel, interpret, wish, hope for, understand or dislike. Yet from a temporal perspective, the child has a continuous experience; it is he or she who moves from home to school, or plays with a parent then a friend (Hviid, 2008). Of course, some aspects of this experience are foregrounded in specific settings – being the older brother might be more relevant at home than at school; yet these experiences do not switch on and off. Hence, if motive orientations can be evaluated in the light of the demands of specific settings, from a developmental perspective, these orientations are just one part of a continuous process of sense making. In effect, it is part of the constant process people have of connecting on-going experiences with past ones and possible and future ones, thanks to internalized or surrounding semiotic means – more or less organized or complex traces of past experiences, words, languages images and so on. As continuous process, sense making is never the same twice; thinking about football is not the same on a sunny day after a victory as it is on a miserable day after losing a match. Of course, some activities demand the uses of strongly structured activities and semiotic means – generally, doing mathematics is disconnected enough from daily activities to be always the same – yet even so, mathematical division can awake a child's deep fears of being dismembered (Boimare, 2004), or feelings of inequalities (Perret-Clermont, Carugati, & Oates, 2004; Perret-Clermont & Nicolet, 2003). Hence, sense making is a continuous process, in the flow of which single sub-orientations can be singled out – although these are changing. Inferring children's motive orientations is therefore a delicate endeavor.

Transitions and development

This leads me to reflect on the notion of transition. In this collection of papers, what are the transitions at stake? In Hedegaard and Bøttcher's papers, transitions are related to the child or the learner's here-and-back move from home or family life to school; in Sanchez-Medina et al., this transition is also mentioned, with an emphasis on the whole family's migration from one country to another one. Changing scale, Fler considers changes in patterns of activities when she examines transitions in and out of the imaginary, very much in the line of Schuetz's explorations (Schuetz, 1945). Adopting a longer time scale, Ullstadius considers the

changing patterns of mother–infant interaction — which at the small scale is about dealing with different activities, but in the longer scale might be seen as an instance of transition within, or to a mother–child relation. Finally Chaiklin considers historical–cultural transitions that eventually transform educational settings themselves. Obviously, scales are different, and agents are as well: is it a person transiting, or knowledge, or a relationship, or a social configuration? If the agents and the scale are different, then one might wonder what calling them all “transition” might add. Perhaps transition becomes a synonymous for change that emphasizes the “being-in-change” dynamic of the process. In the light of the dialectic dynamics present in these papers, transitions might designate the moment of reorganization of systems, whether we consider patterns of activities, a person's life course, an intersubjective relation or a wider social system (Van Geert, 1988). Alternatively, it might designate precisely the moment where a system — including a person — might be still in between two states — many scholars thus have referred to Van Gennep's ideas of liminality (Van Gennep, 1981) — as in rituals — within transitions, or to the idea of intermediary zone or transitional phenomena à la Winnicott (Winnicott, 2001), with all the rich undertones these notions have. Yet still, using the same notion to designate heterogeneous phenomena has the inconvenience of becoming metaphorical of itself, and of not designating any process in particular; it becomes a non-actionable concept (Cornish & Gillespie, 2009).

In our past work, our solution to that problem was to focus on one perspective on transitions — a focus on the person's experience within her socially and culturally situated trajectory. This allowed us to consider moments, or periods, common-sensically called transitions — transition to school, to parenthood, to professional identity, in migration, etc., yet to question the psychological processes involved here (Greco Morasso & Zittoun, 2014; Hviid & Zittoun, 2008; Kadianiki & Zittoun, 2014; Masdonati & Zittoun, 2012; Perret-Clermont & Zittoun, 2002; Wentzel & Zittoun, 2011; Zittoun, Aveling, Gillespie, & Cornish, 2012; Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivanson, & Psaltis, 2003; Zittoun & Perret-Clermont, 2009; Zittoun, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2012a, 2012b).

A starting point was to define transitions as a catalyzed process of change: transition must be a special sort of change — otherwise, as we are temporal beings, everything would be transition (Zittoun, 2009). We decided to focus on the changes that follow an event a person experienced as rupture, that is, as a disruption of a previous state of acting, feeling or being. A first surprise in that respect is that what an observer might consider as a transition — e.g., the move to university, or the outburst of a war — might not always be perceived as such by a person — who might be much more engaged in dealing with the end of a relationship, or with the problem of shortage of food. As a consequence, analyzing transitions was for us usefully preceded by identifying what is subjectively felt as rupture by a person, and then, possibly, identify the possible causes (mainly on the observable or social reality). Identifying ruptures might rely on verbal declarations in the first person (e.g. “I felt a clash”) or in indirect statements (e.g., “I felt lost, tired, etc.”), but is very often induced from other forms of semiotic externalization — conduct becoming suddenly much less coherent and random, different try-and-fail, and so on. In the chapters presented here, the authors were invited to examine transitions in terms of changing motive orientation — either in a child's move between one activity setting and another or between activities in the same activity setting. The focus in most of the papers is a change in the child's motive orientation. This focus invited the papers to highlight similar indications of subjective change. Hence, children searching activities (Fleer), a disabled boy's agitation (Bøttcher), or a mother's intolerance to her child's screams (Ullstadius) can be read both in terms of changes in motive orientation, or as the indication of transition processes following rupturing experiences.

Identifying these moments of disruption allows us then to consider the processes by which new conduct is established — that is, the actual processes of transition. This is where our approach joins the ones described in these papers. Indeed, what appeared heuristically powerful was to consider three interrelated processes of changes. The first one is typically called learning. In a new situation, here for instance facing a math's task, or entering school in a new country, demands learning the language, the field-related conceptual tools, the ways of interacting, all the formal and informal knowledge and codes which belong to the demands of the situation. Yet learning never comes about as an isolated phenomenon, it is always associated with a second line of changes, identity processes — in both the a sense of being perceived, categorized or recognized by others, and the sense of feeling as one person, or interrupted, or valuable. Finally, these two processes are associated with a third line of transformation, connected to the more general sense conferred on the situation: how does it relate to other situations, how can it be named, what are the emotions connected to it, how can it be looked at, what are the implications for the next moments, or for the future?

Obviously, a person will enter different identity-sense-knowledge configuration in what we have called different spheres of experiences (Zittoun, 2012a) or here, activity settings. It is this combination which eventually constitutes what authors here call “motive orientations”. Yet the person is the same when moving through different settings, with different dynamics of recognition. Analyzing motive orientation in order to capture these dynamics allows a finer grain analysis of what a person bring from one setting to another one: when a child interprets the present situation on the basis of her knowledge of another one, for instance as a “playing situation” bringing in her knowledge of playing rules, or her feeling of being good at games, it can change meaning if it is revealed to be an examination situation, which then might draw on the person's previous experiences of being humiliated by a teacher (Muller & Perret-Clermont, 1999; Perret-Clermont, Perret, & Bell, 1991). In the terms used in this collection, the same situation would offer a very different motive orientation. Conversely, a person might draw on the sense built in past situations, such a personal life philosophy motive implying that “there is something good in any situation”, which allows a certain sense of trust to guide the person's learning attitude.

From the perspectives adopted here, the papers by Hedegaard, Bøttcher, Fleer, and Ullstadius present us with situations in which the main person is experiencing a rupture. In the two first cases, the rupture has been important on one occasion — the first day at school — and then becomes part of the smooth transitive moments of moving through daily activity settings. In that case, there is a moment of actual learning — that of mastering the implicit rules and norms, the required skills, by a given setting the classroom, homework, computer games which will draw on past experience of self-identity. Additional learning is also required: precisely that of alternating these configurations (skills required, type of position, the sense it has) as they move between settings or meet new

demands in existing settings (Fleer). Adults are often quite good at alternating them from home to work and back – and even so, many need a liminal phase of adjustment – a shower, sports or a drink after work might allow one to step down from his director-identity to become a father again, or to stop thinking about technical problems to anticipate the skills required for one's upcoming dance class, or simply to change the values one has to refer to – before moving back to home life and its demands.

In contrast with these transitive changes, in Ullstadius' paper, the rupture – the birth of a child and the following transition, that to being a mother, is intransitive: it is once for all without coming back. Hence, the observations made of mother being progressively dealing with, or progressively irritated by their children can be read as the long process of transition to knowing-how-to-interact-with this-child. As in other cases, it demands new skills – how to interpret the child's demands, her moves – an identity transformation – of being the parent of that child – and issues of sense – emotions provoked by a hopeless child can be strong, and the whole experience is knowingly reactivating one's earlier childhood.

The space for creative change

Whether one considers transition as a psychological developmental process, as the cases just mentioned, or as a more general process of change – social, cultural–historical as in the contributions by Chaiklin and Sanchez-Medina et al.,– the question of the direction of the change has to be raised. In the framework developed by Hedegaard and her colleagues, the child's motives have eventually to fit the demands of the activity setting. In this condition the child can learn and become a member of a school and a society. In some cases, it is the demands that may be changed, as in Bøttcher's analysis. But ultimately, there is a necessary adjustment between these demands and the person's motives. Hence the question: what does one develop towards? Is it always conformity to the societal demands? The answer is obviously no – and this appears clearly in Chaiklin's paper: social progress occurs in the on-going mismatch between demands and the answers as system might provide. Things might be similar in children's life; the gap might not need to be filled. First, what if the activity setting is destructive – a delinquent group (Hundeide, 2005), a politically oriented educational system? In that case one needs to be able *not* to adjust to one's motives. Second, it is increasingly recognized that newness, creativity, and new understanding, emerges precisely in the mismatch between the demands of a situation and a person's or a group's activity (Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013). There is much to be learnt from thematizing that gap or mismatch: the space between current motive orientation and new demands, the messy exploration, the maintained mismatch – this might be where development and change of a system occur.

Openings

This special issue brings together a set of papers that invites us to consider learning processes not in isolation, but where these always take place, in the life of learners who interact with others, who move from formal teaching–learning settings to more informal activity settings and back – at home, with friends or with family members. The cultural–historical approach offers a powerful frame in which to see learning as dynamic and situated process, which always has to be reconsidered in its wider context, which guides it, yet also, leaves some margin of freedom to people. Finally, when considering transitions, one is invited to pay specific attention to the processes by which people might also resist social and cultural demands, and might reinvent themselves and participate in the transformation of their environment.

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