

# Generalising from a regional case study: A dialogue with a hill

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## Abstract

In this article, I propose a sociocultural psychological and dialogical approach of a Czech hill. I first briefly present how I came to study and built it into a dialogical case study. I then explore sociogenetic dynamics at stake – the historical and mythical existence of the hill, and how it reflects in its appearances and its uses – microgenetic dynamics – everyday encounters around the hill – and ontogenetic dynamics – the lives of people under the hill. Drawing on a series of sociocultural theoretical tools and on dialogical authors, I try to show how phenomena at each level of analysis are deeply affected by, or affecting, phenomena at other levels, and I highlight specific dialogical dynamics and patterns. I then discuss the more fundamental dialogical encounter that takes place between a researcher and such complex dialogical case study in terms of dialogical ethics. I finally reflect on issues of generalisation that may follow from as such case study, and on the dialogue it engages with current scientific debates.

## Keywords

Generalisation, case study, semiotic processes, region, dialogicality

*... if, for instance, one is confronted by a single hill, which is set into the plain as a 'spatial form' with its base below the surface, one can also imagine that it is merely a curvature in the plain, a bump in the ground; one can also see the hill as a 'planar form'. Or if the pedestrian sees the fields and meadows before him as nature in the aesthetic sense, he can also well imagine the quite different landscape that the farmer would encounter here ...*  
(Lewin, 1917/2009, p. 201)

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What is a hill, and why would a hill offer an interesting entry point to study psychological phenomena, and with it, to propose generalisable understandings? A hill, as any other material or physical entity offered to living beings, is more than a curvature of the landscape or a pile of minerals; a hill is a place, it is perceived, interpreted, and especially for humans, it can be narrated and imagined. Even more so, because a hill, as natural and geographical entity, has some enduring properties, it can become part of human temporality. It thus invites us to consider it as part of the history of regions and groups, as component of people's everyday activities, or as presence accompanying people's unfolding lives. A hill and its region can thus be built as interesting, yet challenging, dialogical case study: because it has an unity of place, it invites to consider the dialogue between physical entities (stones, trees, space, bodies) and semiotic dynamics (meaning), as well as the interplay between different dynamics of change – at the scale of history, every day events, and courses of life.

This article addresses three ranges of questions. First, it explores how a regional case study may offer a good entry for the study of sociocultural dynamics; it thus shows how a hill can be turned into a dialogical case study, and what dialogical phenomena could be put to the fore. The two further questions follow from such elaboration. Hence, second, building a dialogical case study demands assuming a dialogical epistemology, that is, considering the primacy of the *I-you* relation, and the uniqueness of any person or entity; and this necessarily has ethical implications (Lévinas, 1998; Marková, 2016). How then can we speak of the ethics of research in such a dialogical case study? For this I will turn back to authors who have theorised dialogical ethics, and reflect upon such a dialogical case study. Third, if the hill under study is so specific and unique, how is it possible to build some understanding that would have more general implications? How can we generalise from a dialogical case study?

## **Building the dialogical case of a hill**

Recently I engaged in a regional case study, the study of a hill (Figure 1). That hill, called Říp, and its immediate region, notably a series of small villages and a larger town located in Czech Republic, appeared to me as an intriguing place to study, and to approach from a sociocultural, dialogical perspective (Zittoun, 2019). In effect, this hill plays an interesting role in the history of the nation, and is symbolically imbued with mythical value, being treated as the place of foundation of the country. Nowadays, it is a small rural region 30 km from Prague, where people live in a combination of traditional and urban modes of livings, and where tourism is slowly developing. In the villages around the hill live older people who have personally experienced most of the dramatic historical events that affected the country and transformed the region during the last century (WWII, communism and its aftermath). Initially, I was struck by the fact that the hill was both so famous and life there so quiet, that the villages under the hill were so close to Prague – half an hour by bus or by car – yet that the everyday life of people living



**Figure 1.** Říp, from Mnetes, copyright author, 2016.

close to their fields and engaged in village balls was so distant from the vibrant, international and famous cultural life of the capital city. Triggered by this surprise – a good starting point for an enquiry (Zittoun, 2017) – I soon realised that studying such a small region could offer an interesting unit of analysis to approach the mutual making of sociogenetic, microgenetic and ontogenetic dynamics (Duveen, 1997; Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). More precisely, I was interested in how the themes and issues that emerged and transformed the history and mythical fabric of the hill were part of the making and shaping of people’s daily lives, and also, of personal courses of life, and how these, in turn, were transforming the hill. Finally, this was for me also an invitation to work on the theoretical tools which, in sociocultural psychology, would enable us to account for such complex and interrelated dynamics.

Methodologically, I thus built a dialogical case study, documenting each of these three layers. I collected historical documents, literary testimonies, evidence displayed by museums, but also, observations of the region and the media, to document sociogenetic dynamics; I engaged in ethnographic work and thematic interviews (in French, German or Czech, the latter with a translator) with five people to document daily life and interactions (microgenesis); and I collected two life-narratives of women in their early nineties through repeated interviews in German, supported by photos and documents, to reconstruct ontogenetic dynamics. I then analysed each of these three levels individually, and then by pairs, and finally all at once, in dialogue with theory. In what follows, I start

with presenting the main findings of a dialogical analysis of dynamics occurring at the sociogenetic, microgenetic and ontogenetic levels.

### **Sociogenesis and its echoes: The hill as umbilicus of a nation**

Říp is a 459 metres high hill sticking its belly out of the plains of Northern Bohemia. It is visible from far away, and nowadays, along the Dresden–Prague highway. Geologically, it is the remnant of a volcano, and has therefore specific properties; for instance, compasses do not show the North on the hill, and rare plants grow along its faces. Early present in human history, the hill has been depicted since the 12th century as the place on which, in some pre-historic times, one of the many tribes crossing the land climbed, and where its chief stated, contemplating the rich landscapes on all sides, that this was the land of milk and honey and that it would be the land of his people. And so the story goes, the people cheered and gave to the land the name of that old chief, Czech, now considered as the forefather of the nation.

These material and historical aspects make that Říp is part of wide streams of historical, political discourses and social representations; it can thus be apprehended at a sociogenetic level. Hence, every time the nation underwent a crisis, the hill became the themes of painting and celebrations: recently, in 2018, celebrating the 100 years of the First republic (1918–1938), paintings of the hill were shown in art galleries and reproduced in magazines and documentaries. For decades, school children visit the hill with their class; and many people in the Czech republic still know a couple of legends about it – that of forefather Czech, but also some about the ‘magical’ properties of the hill: walking anti clock-wise on the circular pathway that goes all around the hill makes younger; it calms anger and feeds energy when needed; shamans come for rituals in this highly energetic place, and so on and so forth.

This has consequence for microgenetic, daily encounters. The historical–mythical potential of the hill is in effect widely celebrated in the five villages directly under it. Pubs and restaurant are either called ‘forefather Czech’ or ‘under the hill’; the hill, with its characteristic wave-like shape, is painted everywhere: each restaurant around is ornamented with a painting or a carving representing the hill, the hill is painted in a bus stop, a stylised version of the hill is used as logo for many local companies, wooden models of the hill can be found in the museum and the tourist office in the town nearby. People who live in villages under the hill mostly have a direct view on it, from their garden or through a window; one person told me that she refuses to have a painting on the walls, because only the hill was to be treated as view – in her case, as in many houses, it was indeed framed by the window and turned into an artefactual landscape (Janowski & Ingold, 2012; Lewin, 1917/2009; Valsiner, 2019b). Hence, the historico-mythical meaning of the hill became contained in the shape of the hill, itself stylised; the hill itself becomes a collective semiotic creation. As people move around the hill for their daily chores, shopping or family visits, by roads relating them, by pathways

just under or on the hill, they thus keep seeing the hill and its visual pattern, and they experience its circularity. On a daily basis, the real hill and its representation create a perfectly redundant ornament (Valsiner, 2019b) in an enclosed geographical space.

Such historical–mythical discourse enters in dialogue with people’s lives. People who were not born in one of the villages under the hill, and chose to live there as adults, often justify their choice by an inexplicable attraction. They say how, coming for a day trip or a visit, they ‘felt at home’, had an experience of ‘*déjà vu*’, or felt attracted as if ‘by a magnet’; such experiences, they at times justify by possible family roots – they respond to a call of the hill. Interestingly, thus, the diffuse stories, social representations, narratives, pictorial and media representations of the hill, seem to create a very pervasive and redundant semiotic network, to which all of these people have been exposed as children and adults; it is part of the buzzing noise of discourses that may remain on the background, which, become unreflexively internalised, at ‘the periphery of consciousness’ (Valsiner, 2019b). Meeting the hill ‘for real’ seemed thus to have reactivated all these previously un-reflected meanings and images. In addition, some of these people who chose to move to the hill region were also experiencing a transition – after a divorce or before a birth – and were thus in a liminal state, often prone to new semiotic creations (Stenner, 2017; Zittoun, 2006). Hence, the real hill and people’s mnemonic associations about the hill seem to have entered in resonance, creating this strange familiarity (Freud, 1919), and so emotionally charged that it supported an actual move. In this case, then, it seems that dialogical dynamics, whereby diffuse social discourses become part of more personal sense making, are taking place (Marková, 2003) and create what may be called dialogical ‘shortcut’ from sociogenesis to ontogenesis. A dialogical shortcut is thus a semiotic process by which a person’s unorganised diffuse affective experience is suddenly signified, or contained, by an equally diffuse set of semiotic elements (social representations, images, narratives) loosely pertaining to a same semantic network, here related to the hill, available in the sociocultural environment, over a long period of time; it is a shortcut, as this meeting between socio and ontogenetic processes is not negotiated in specific microgenetic instances. It can be experienced in a flash or as sudden insight, as many other ‘a-ha’ moments in which so far unresolved uncertainties or tensions can be felt to be suddenly solved<sup>1</sup> (Stenner, 2017; Valsiner, 2015; Zittoun, 2011).

Starting my enquiry with the observation that the hill is both a geographical reality and the object of many discourses and representations, I have shown how it soon became a component of a general national and local dialogue, diffracted and transformed through history and place, and across semiotic modes: pictures, paintings, signs – themselves transforming the actual apprehension one may have of the hill as geographical place. People do not see a hill, they see mythical *Říp*, which, in Bakhtinian terms (Bakhtin, 1982, 1996), carries the echoes and harmonics of all these past stories and narratives, and resonates with people’s most intimate questions.

## **Microgenesis: Everyday encounters around the hill**

Participating in village life – going to the pub, hanging out at the annual fair under the hill, attending a firemen’s tournament – or simply talking to people, brings to realise that people who live in the villages around Říp engage in all kind of dialogues related to their life around the hill. First there are the obvious everyday conversations, and real dialogues, which can take semiotic and material forms. At the scale of the family, the street or the generations, people exchange information and news, but also, jams and vegetables, dinners and drinks at spontaneous grilling, cakes and shots at birthdays and name’s days. Second, people engage in more historical or intergenerational dialogue when they deliberately cultivate local traditions or cultural subsystems: participating in the hunter’s activities, or the fireman’s tournament. Third, people create or cultivate intergroup dynamics, which may be more or less dialogical – they create and mobilise symbolic boundaries (Pachucki, Pendergrass, & Lamont, 2007; Wimmer, 2008) that turn, in certain occasions and about certain topics, their neighbours in ‘others’ – at times creating semantic barriers that block dialogues (Gillespie, Kadianaki, & O’Sullivan-Lago, 2012). Hence, some people consider that part of the population are ‘old’ in that they reject political decisions that do not have short-term implications; some think that others are ‘bad’ people trying to change the village in favour of their personal project; some emphasise that some people are ‘prajaci’ – people from Prague or more generally from the city, who think better of themselves than the rest of the villagers – etc. These dynamics are fluid, local, and appear in discussion and at times in practices; some overlap classical sociocultural categories – e.g., socioeconomic and gender divisions – but many are more anchored in the specificities of the local stories and dynamics. Interestingly, one may also think that these divisions are related to deeper undercurrents, historical and demographic dynamics. Hence, it may be that ‘old’ people privilege shorter-term investment, because they remember times in the history were unpredictable events disrupted all planning and made them lose all their savings (as it did happen many times during the war and communist years).

The hill is present in people’s everyday life, not only in the overt way just described; applying a more interpretative analysis, I wish to show more differentiated dialogical dynamics between people and the hill, both as material and semiotic reality. To understand these modes of living under the hill, I draw on two conceptual distinctions. First, I use the notions of proximal and distal spheres of experiences, designating configuration of practices, feelings, identity aspects, that have some stability for a person; proximal spheres of experience occur in real social and physical time, in the material surrounding; distal experiences are mainly carried through imagination and can thus be detached from the here-and-now (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015, 2016). Second, I am attentive to distinguish activities that were primarily embodied and material, from these that were primarily semiotic – although, of course, most human activities are both. These two distinctions partly overlap, yet enable to create interesting distinctions.

Some people around the hill simply repeat social or mythical discourses, yet they do so as people living elsewhere would, without particular investment or internalisation of these, or attention to the hill itself. In that sense, they seem to superficially internalise, or, in dialogical term, they practice a form of ventriloquation (Gillespie, 2005). Other people, in contrast, live their lives and engage in various activities on or around the hill – hiking or biking on it, farming or hunting on its slope, or painting it – yet without much attention for these more symbolic aspects. In other words, they do stuff with the hill – it is a tool to be used in the physical world, a part of their proximal spheres of experiences, but without the use of these semiotic, mythical discourses. Interestingly, a third group of people combines these embodied appropriations, with a more symbolic internalisation, conferring a personal sense to the stories about the hill, or defining personal rites.

Hence, Jaromir<sup>2</sup> ‘reinvented’ the regional tradition of yearly pilgrimage to the hill, into a family tradition whereby, he, his cousin and close friends, escalate the hill once a year from the steeper side with their own flag, find on the top a bottle of plum brandy that was buried the previous year, drink it, and write an entry in a special yearbook. They thus create a new tradition, a cultural subsystem connecting them to an imaginary past. Internalisation is here more active and shared, and translated into a form of ‘in-growing’ (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018). Such double appropriation, by a physical or enacted relation to the hill, doubled with an internalised, personal symbolic relation to it, thus creates a strong coordination of proximal spheres of experiences with distal ones. Through the analysis of people’s single cases around the hill, it seems that such alignment of proximal and distal spheres of experience upon the same geographical and semiotic space turns the place into a very solid anchoring for people, or even, an attractor point in their daily life. Jaromir, for instance, did travel around Europe and the country; yet he sees his future around the hill – even if he would win the lottery. Hence, an alignment or at least partial overlap of proximal and distal spheres of experiences, related to a same physical space, seem to create a sort of stabilising vector.

In contrast, other persons have more disconnected spheres of experiences when it comes to their relation to the hill. Some people can develop such distal, mainly imaginary experiences of, or about the hill – they know stories and myths about it – but live their significant proximal spheres of experiences elsewhere, for instance not participating to the local life at all, working and travelling elsewhere, etc. Others, symmetrically, engage numerous proximal spheres of experience on the hill – biking and walking on the hill – but develop their distal spheres of experience elsewhere: they dream to travel and to explore the world. Either way, what seems to be a relative disconnection of spheres of experiences and distance from the physical hill next to which they live brings them to express an ambivalent relation to *Říp*: they live there, would like to leave but feel forced to remain; or they live there, like it, but feel pulled elsewhere with not much to retain them. In schematic terms, one could say that people are taken in more centripetal or centrifugal forces. Interestingly, the force of this semiotic work depends on the appropriation or the

engagement in the material, geographical counterpart of the experience of living on and next to the hill.

At this microgenetic level, thus, there is a wide flow of dialogical dynamics going on; there are dialogues among people, echoes of past discourses, anticipation of the future, constitution of subgenres, dialogical dynamics which are more or less generative; this general dialogicality can be described in Bakhtinian terms, as the streams and waves of discourse that create both individual consciousness and social fabric (Bakhtin, 1982, 1996); the hill is just a background or an ‘it’. However, in the specific case of the few people who engage in a deep dialogue with the hill – these that engage in semiotic work and practices, that align their spheres of experiences with the symbolic and material reality of the hill – something distinctive appears – in Buber’s terms (1953), these people seem to engage with the hill a more direct *I–Thou* dialogue.

### **Ontogenesis: Living a life in dialogue with history and a place**

At a different scale, one can reconstruct the unfolding of a specific life within its historical and geographical context (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2015; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). Beyond the adults living under the hill which I met to speak about their daily lives, I had the chance to meet two women in their early nineties, and with whom we explored their courses of lives. The analysis of their trajectories, crossing places and events which are documented by historians and novelists, reveals surprising factual resemblances, and important differences in terms of how these were interpreted.

Sandra and Zdenka both were born in Czech border regions, referred to as ‘Sudetenland’ – these territories where the population used to be in part of German origin, part of Czech origin, and that became one of the first target of Hitler’s expansionism in 1938. Both born in mixed, German-Czech families, they both endured the death of a mother in early age, moved physically (to the hill) or symbolically (becoming German) as being Czech in a now German region during the war, became suspected of collaboration with the Nazis at the end of the war, lost brothers as German soldiers, met their Czech husbands and married in the confusion of the immediate after-war, could use their bilinguism as resources later, and tried to establish a family and a life under the hill, hard-working while communism hit repeatedly their families.

There are however differences in how the two women experienced these events, and especially, in with whom they experienced it, and in what sorts of dialogue and relationships they were taking part. Sandra was separated very young from her family and taken care of by a step-family, and every hardship was approached by a supportive community – networks of neighbours, extended family-in-law, or villagers – who discussed issues, listened to illegal radio together, organised food support in times of rationing, or shared children’s care. In contrast, Zdenka came from a loving family, with especially a very respected and powerful uncle, who solved most of the family’s problems – papers, housing, employment, and



remarkably, was able to prevent the family's deportation when, at the end of the war, angry Czech militia were expelling German-related families from the Sudeten region. Sandra learned very soon to engage in strong networked modes of collaboration and dialogue, while Zdenka learned to seek the advice and protection from more authoritative figures. One may say that Sandra developed a very horizontal experience of interpersonal dialogicality, which then seemed to have been internalised into a more dialogical and caring form of thinking politics. Zdenka, as an adult, kept learning and developing skills acquired from her uncle and father, and transmitted them further (teaching German, or cooking to her grandchildren) and cultivating their memory – a more vertical form of dialogicality.

Reflecting about their lives, or entering in dialogue with the historical past and their own trajectories, the two women appeared to have developed contrasting generalised lessons from life, or 'life-philosophies' (Zittoun et al., 2013). Sandra repeatedly commented on the historical events that shaped her life as being part of a 'crazy world'; she explained that history was always made by some big power attacking a specific group – the Jews, the Germans, the 'bourgeois' or rather small craftsmen – eventually saving their interests, while the little ones had to pay. Zdenka, in contrast, would often simply say that 'as long as it goes, it goes' – if one's health is fine, then one can make it.

Interestingly these two life-philosophies could also be linked to the preferred dialogical modalities, in which these two women had repeatedly engaged. In effect, these small personal proverbs could be seen as synthesis, abstracted or generalised experiences of living, based on these two main dialogical modalities – more horizontal, more vertical – described above, and crystallised in common sayings – 'the world is crazy' (and full of never-ending dialogical movement whereby the poor loses), or 'as long as things go' (and as long as we can maintain and cultivate what we have). In other words, these two life courses can be seen as traversed and shaped by the echoes of their specific historical contexts; and yet, each of these women developed a unique melody of living (Zittoun et al., 2013) here understood as a dialogical pattern crystallised in a few words – an unique 'face', in Lévinas' terms (Lévinas, 1998).

## **Dialogical analysis**

Through these three points, I have applied a dialogical epistemology (Marková, 2016) which brought me to identify a variety of dialogical dynamics, and to highlight three complementary dynamics: the dialogue between social discourses and personal sense making, the dialogical tensions between one's mode of acting and of imagining, and the echoes of dynamics of dialogue with others, within patterns of inner-dialogue. For each aspects, I can now show how the sorts of dialogical dynamics highlighted so far seem to primarily correspond to the positions of one of the three classical dialogical authors – Mikhail Bakhtin, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Lévinas (Marková, Zadeh, & Zittoun, 2019). Looking at the general echoes and responses, circulation of meaning and harmonics around a hill,

through time and place, it could be said that I had a quite Bakhtinian understanding of dialogue (Bakhtin, 1982, 1996). Examining how people engage in dialogue with the hill – as a place and as a semiotic reality – I have distinguished two modalities of dialogues: in the first one, people treat the hill as mere place to be, or sets of stories – the hill remains something external and detached, that can be used or mentioned – in Buber’s terms, it is an *it* (Buber, 1953). In the second mode, people engage in the hill both as place, where their proximal spheres of experience take place, and as part of their imagination through distal experiences; the junction of these two manifests in the re-creation of collective meaning into personal sense and practices. They develop thus a personal and intimate relation to the hill; the hill becomes the other of dialogue, a *Thou*. Finally, examining how the life of two women were built in dialogue with their changing times, but also, within specific configurations of family and friendly relationships, I propose that these dialogical patterns could also be seen to be crystallised in what became their unique life philosophies, unique to themselves, as unique as their faces – à la Levinas (Lévinas, 1998). Hence, adopting a dialogical epistemology on a case study bares its fruits, in that it allows highlighting interesting, still undocumented sociocultural psychological dynamics.

### *A dialogical case study? Building a dialogue with people in the case*

What I presented so far may appear as if I, as a researcher and as an author, was not part of the equation. I came to know the Czech Republic through a series of biographical chance events, and for more than 15 years, I have spent at least a couple of months a year in the region. This region and its people welcomed me, surprised me, upset me, opened to me, and yet kept resisting to my understanding. In a very fundamental dialogical way, the hill faced me and it engaged me – and the case study I summarise here is my answer to it, my attempt to preserve its uniqueness and integrity (Lévinas, 1998). Similarly, the life of people I have documented touched me, and I dare to think that, beyond the necessary asymmetry of a research interview, we established dialogues. These were supported by emotional dynamics related to my own personal and family story, and which anchored my engagement in what I believe to be authentic *I-thou* encounters (Buber, 1953). In terms of a dialogical ethic, thus, it is a person and as a researcher that I met the hill and its people, that I saw their ‘face’, and felt ‘called upon’ them (Lévinas, 1998); my writing somehow constitutes my answer to this. However, because of my commitment toward them, I now have a responsibility. Dialogues with people I interviewed cannot be cut, as turning them to worn-out participants would be treating them as ‘*it*’; in some sense, as human, I am engaged, and my care for people cannot be suspended. Even more, as I told all these participants that our recorded conversations would be part of a book on their hill, I owe them restitution beyond the academic elaborations I am summarising here.

Two questions remain open in dialogical ethical terms, however. First, if the encounter with people in the field can tend to be dialogical, it remains that

the scientific work demands some form of reduction, which always threatens the acknowledgement of the alterity of the other, even when it is not only done as a way to hide one's anxiety (Devereux, 1967). One of these reductions is the analytical moment: once the story of a person is told or summarised so as to highlight a type, a dynamic or a process, then the person as such is lost. Does this make any research endeavour non-ethical? I believe not: I think that we can, in any project, both account for the uniqueness of what or who we study, and respect it as long as possible, and for commonalities, as the analytical moment may bring to the fore. We can think these two moments as the necessary alternation between *I-Thou* and *I-it* proposed by Buber. In addition, the sort of sociocultural psychology I engage in has precisely as aim to identify general dynamics whereby, in a given setting and social environment, singular courses of living are emerging. The second problem is harder to solve: one implication of Levinas' position could be that, as researcher, I have become responsible to care for the lives of people who confide in me. This is a delicate question, especially vivid when one, as researcher, works with fragile population. Here, as my enquiry as a researcher grew out of an engagement to the region as a person, I hope that the relationship will simply be maintained by me, *I* as a person, as my role as a researcher will fade out.

### *A dialogical case study? Building a dialogue, around the case, with others*

There is, as in any other scientific project, an additional stream of dialogues going on. As researcher, I do have another range of answerabilities and responsibilities, and this is toward my real or imagined research community. Of course, how I come to define a research project, which projects I prioritise, what themes or questions I chose to write about up depend on my own research trajectory. But it would be naïve not to consider it dialogically. For one, most of the interrogations we pursue as academics, as well as our questions, methodological choices and theoretical reflections, grew out of dialogues with other scientists, academics or thinkers: through our own training and teaching, in face-to-face meetings, through our readings, through scientific events, but also peer-review and evaluation, we cultivate the curiosity and skills that characterise our practice. In addition, it is also in front of our research communities that we have to speak, or be answerable for our theoretical and methodological choices, as well as for our writings and positions. If I have to justify my choices, it is because I expect the kind, or harsher gaze of my colleagues and peers, the scrutiny of more distant readers, or the scepticism of others. In the open-ended game of science, it is to a great part the community who creates the warranty of validity.

As we are working at the border of one's knowledge, the approval of very few is enough to know that we are still part of this generalised dialogue. It is as part of a dialogue that what we built as dialogical case study can be acknowledged<sup>3</sup>; and as we expose the work resulting from a dialogical engagement with others in our research fields, we may expect a tacit or explicit approval from our community.

Finally, it is through dialogue with such community that claim on possible generalisation from case studies can be substantiated.

## **A generalisable dialogical stance**

A last step of this reflection thus concerns the question of generalisation. Generalisation in qualitative and case studies are now been abundantly discussed (de Saint-Georges, 2018; Molenaar & Valsiner, 2008; Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010; Valsiner, 2017, 2019a). Demuth recalls that

generalization is about drawing conclusions from particular instances (from the observed) to the unobserved. The goal of generalization is reaching a higher level of abstraction in order to contribute to scientific knowledge/theory. (Demuth, 2018, p. 79)

One of the key questions here is how generalisation is produced when one works with a single case; based on a reading of Peirce, I have proposed elsewhere that generalisation needs a ground from which to stand, and identify, within a case, some patterns (Zittoun, 2017). To such proposition, Jaan Valsiner (2019a) has added that it is equally important to ignore other patterns. What I propose to generalise from the present discussion is thus, on the background of a dialogical epistemology and ethics, a mode of reflecting about and through a case study. The generalisation entails three steps.

The first step is epistemological: a dialogical approach of a case study brought me to identify, through the plurality of voices and meaning, some order in the life of a hill. Following a three-level analysis, along socio-, micro and ontogenesis, I tried to identify echoes, recurrences and redundancies across levels, using for this a dialogical analysis based on the premise that the sociocultural world creates the conditions of people's unique voice, and that these participate, in turn, do that dialogue with others and the world. More specifically, I found traces of a dialogue between history and social discourses, and people's stories; I proposed to see correspondences between people's organisation of proximal experiences, and distal experiences, and thus, dialogue between situations, and their integration in inner-dialogues; I finally identified people's recurrent patterns of dialogical dynamic, and their echoes in people's inner-dialogue. At these three levels, I have tried to identify what I have called 'dynamic patterns' by which the sociocultural world organises inner-dialogues (Zittoun, 2019). Hence, I applied two already generalised theoretical principles – dialogicality and a three-layer analysis. From there, pursuing a line of reflection started in other case studies (Gillespie, Cornish, Aveling, & Zittoun, 2008; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015), I proposed candidates for further theoretical generalisation.

As a second step, I proposed a reflection based on dialogical ethics, responding to more traditional or standards ethical guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2017; Société Suisse de Psychologie, 2003) with the problems they recently raised (Aalbers & Teo, 2017). Drawing on concerns developed by Buber

and Lévinas, I proposed to ground ethic in a fundamental obligation to preserve, as much as possible, the uniqueness and fullness of the alterity under study, which call upon our engagement and responsibility. Here as well, I believe that a detour to such authors invites us to bring new elements to current discussions about the researcher's position and her or his reflexivity, in a manner that may complete auto-ethnographic approaches (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010; Wall, 2006).

The third step is at the frontier between epistemological and ethical concerns, and addresses the very dialogue in which this present reflection takes place. Indeed, it is part of an ongoing dialogue with a specific group of colleagues, extending to a wider community of scholars in the past and in possible futures; there, and ethical positions makes me, as each of us, answerable to others and in front of others (Cornish, 2019b). More generally, as academics, the work we undertake does somehow respond to questions raised by society, or engages the society to which we belong. A study like is thus part of a wider dialogue with society. For engaging a regional dialogical case study may indeed invite new, and more specifically relevant and dialogical projects (Cornish, 2019a). Learning from the present case, we thus recently designed a dialogical, collaborative project to study the transformations of housing for older people in a Swiss region, and we hope that such study will feed back on other dialogical endeavours.

Finally, trying to discuss dialogically the issue of generalisation from single cases is a way to place case studies, as well as ourselves as authors of these studies – always about people's lives – in a more general dialogical movement. My propositions here grew as part of a dialogue with Ivana Marková (2016) and other colleagues (Cornish, 2019a, 2019b; Coultas, 2019; Hviid, 2019; Marková & Novaes, 2019; Marková et al., 2019; Zadeh & Cabra, 2019), which transformed my way of reflecting on case studies. Maybe these will inspire further dialogues.

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### **Notes**

1. In that sense it is not a 'short-circuit' as proposed by Vygotsky and recently discussed by Jaan Valsiner (2015).
2. All names are pseudonyms.

3. More specifically, the present reflection was made possible by intense dialogues with a group of colleagues gathered in Cambridge at the invitation of Ivana Marková and Sophie Zadeh, which I thank here for such generous organisation. This article thus is part of a dialogue reflected in the various articles gathered in this special issue.

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