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978-0-521-76938-9 - Human Development in the Life Course: Melodies of Living  
Tania Zittoun, Jaan Valsiner, Dankert Vedeler, João Salgado, Miguel M. Gonçalves  
and Dieter Ferring

Excerpt

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## Introduction: melodies of living

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Music is one of the main creations of human beings – they create it and live with it. Hence selecting the metaphor of a melody to be the core of our story of the human life course is not an accidental choice. Our lives are filled with melodies of various kinds and functions – ranging from the lullabies mothers sing to their babies to get them to sleep to the never-ending flow of Christmas carols played in pre-New Year shopping places, to our own individual humming of favourite melodies when involved in some mundane activity. The melodies of church bells, calls to prayer from the minarets of the mosques or marching bands leading public events are all examples of how deeply music saturates our lives.

Melodies have permanence. If you know the music of Elvis Presley, Bach, Robert Smith or Ray Charles, then you will recognize immediately, after a few notes, a new or unknown version of one of their pieces. If, on the other hand, you are familiar with visual art, you will recognize in any museum, and at first sight, a piece as a Matisse, a Rembrandt or a Bruce Neumann. We live in a world of patterns – musical or visual – that we have created out of the need to live our human lives.

Why is this so? Let us propose that it is a matter of *style* and of *motives*.<sup>1</sup> In the musical creations by Shostakovich, for example, there is a certain atmosphere, coming from the composer's time, his life in central Europe, his familiarity with traditional Moravian music as well as emerging jazz. Yet there are also, like a signature, little motives or musical phrases that appear, with all kinds of variation, in most of his pieces – a specific melody. Similarly, we identify people's writing, or we recognize old friends from afar because of their general silhouette or their way of moving. If there is something so unique in each person's externalization – their movements, paintings, expressions – than there is probably something unique, too, about their lives. And indeed, there is a unique way in which each of us lives through our life: how we understand it, what sorts of question we

<sup>1</sup> This idea is developed on the basis of Hans Thomae's work (1968).

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## 2 Introduction

face, how we interpret it, how we make our decisions. Of course, each of us changes through time: we move from one place to another, our body strength changes, we learn from experience and sometimes we decide never to act in the same way again. Yet – even so – there is a style to each life, and so there are motives that appear regularly, with more or less variation. This uniqueness, this property of each person as a whole, manifested in her ways of thinking or acting, speaking or moving – living – we propose to call her *melody*. *Human Development in the Life course: Melodies of Living* thus has the ambitious goal of giving one possible account of what makes people’s life trajectories so unique, yet human in a shared world.

### Meaning-making and imagination in the centre

This book is written by a group of psychologists. Our goal is to describe the human life course: how people develop and change, and how their life trajectories come to be what they are. We are not the first to address this issue. Yet we have at heart to account for the uniqueness of human life – each person’s melody.

We believe that to account for uniqueness, we have to show how people make sense of what happens to them. The specificity of our approach will thus be a strong emphasis on people’s experiences of the world, and of their inner lives – of course, as might be understood on the basis of their externalization. In particular, we will be interested in how people come to understand their present and make sense of their actions and trajectories. Such understanding includes both real and unreal parts – people understand their current state of being, yet they selectively borrow from their past life experiences, and create imaginary scenarios for the future. Humans are ‘social animals’ – with the very special gift of giving their meaning-making a symbolic, or – as we shall subsequently write in this book – *semiotic*<sup>2</sup> expression, through which humans may communicate between themselves, sharing experiences and ideas and coordinating actions. Even though sharing direct experiences and coordinating actions are not dependent on semiosis, they are still considerably enhanced by semiotic communication. For example, sharing the experience of watching a soccer match does not entail the immediate semiotic creativity of the fan-filled stadium cheering for their teams – yet the whole meaningful context where such sharing of experience happens – the game, the symbolic honouring of ‘key’ players, game rules, etc. – are all semiotic

<sup>2</sup> Semiotics, the science of signs and symbols (from the Greek word σημειῶν, to mark).

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constructs. This implies that the experience of watching a soccer game is always already given as social; yet, and this is our emphasis, how each person experiences that soccer game, what she may feel, think, or say or whether she decides to stay until the end of the match, clap her hands or leave the crowd, just depends on her own unique free choice or agentic power – and her ability to imagine what is beyond the immediately given.

Other animals are, of course, also able to coordinate themselves, but only the phylogenetic development of semiotic abilities allowed humans to develop culture (art and science), representations of the future or elaborated forms of coordination that can occur even in the absence of real people (e.g. through the internet).<sup>3</sup> Such complex semiotic abilities, coupled with the existence of cultural artefacts and semiotic systems inherited through generations, have enabled humans to develop a unique capacity for imagination. In effect, the internalization of signs will allow for inner dialogues, among which are dialogues with self, recall of memories and planning for the future and even constructing a mental reality: impossibilities in the outer world become possible and lived experiences. This inner life, synthesized through constructive *imagination*, plays an important role in our making meaning of our lives. It will receive particular attention in this book.

A person who imagines some future event is not doing something useless. Just the contrary – imagining potential future events makes it possible to strive towards them, or – in the case of adverse imaginary events – to try to avoid them. When imagination is orientated towards the future it becomes a project or an intention. In a similar vein, imagination can also be turned towards the past – and it is a memory. Memory is a reconstructive process – using imagination oriented towards the past to create meanings for the present. Hence imagination can be turned towards alternative experiences and life-worlds, real (happening in other social frames) or possible or impossible ones (as in fiction and daydreaming), and so it enriches the present and opens up new possibilities. Imagination in life is thus a constant process of expansion of the present, along three dimensions – time, space and degrees of reality.

How imagination expands the present and enhances life trajectories is also dependent on the life lived so far, and how much of it one assumes to be left. Hence, imagining the past or the future, moving through spheres of experience, does not have the same implications at ages seven and at seventy-seven. Accounting for this is our task as we propose to follow imagination over life-course trajectories.

<sup>3</sup> See the difference proposed by G. H. Mead (1934) between communication by gestures and communication through significant symbols.

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**Traditional lifespan psychology and our proposition**

There have been numerous accounts of people's life development. Many of them have started by describing typical life trajectories, and have then identified the processes that shaped them. Very often, the processes that were highlighted reflected current agendas in science – in education, health or well-being. Hence, to take the example of two important works, Erik Erikson's study of ruptures and stages proposed to identify people who 'failed' to become adults, or, on the other hand, people who were 'greater' than others;<sup>4</sup> Paul Baltes's proposition to study the core processes of the lifespan also distils the view that old age is an 'illness' in which one has to compensate for biological and functional losses to remain high functioning.<sup>5</sup> Baltes could see the realities of old age – while there may be a decline in physical functioning, there can simultaneously be an increase in general understanding of human life or wisdom. Many societies are known to rely upon the wisdom of elderly people – frail though they may be physically – in resolving local conflicts and granting justice to local communities.

Of course, there is an inherent moral dimension in any scientific project, and we cannot do without it. Our proposition is both very ambitious and – simultaneously – rather modest.

First, *we do not wish to describe typical trajectories*; we rather wish to convey an idea of how various ingredients that enable us to account for the incredible diversity of ways of life, in combination, and over time, make each life course a unique trajectory that requires to be understood on its own premises. Yet we are not naïve, and so we want to highlight the social and cultural, very often invisible constraints, that guide the ways in which people creatively unfold their lives.

Secondly, we wish to *identify core processes, along specific dimensions, which offer an entry into people's life trajectories in complex societies*.

Thirdly – if we have to make explicit our normative beliefs of what constitutes 'good development' or a 'good life' – we would probably say that this is a *life in which playfulness is experienced, and remains possible*.

History – especially recent European history – has seen politically driven, massive attempts to prevent people from developing their 'own melodies'; without similar repression, and beyond a discourse of 'everything is possible', our ultraliberal society exerts other pressures on how people carry on their lives. Understanding the interplay between social guidance – as enabling, yet constraining – and playful adaptation is one of

<sup>4</sup> For instance Erikson (1968, 1993b). <sup>5</sup> For instance Baltes (1997).

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our goals. We will, furthermore, suggest that play is not only fun, but a serious principle for how we face the challenges of daily life, as well as the important crossroads in life. One important stance is that any event in the external world, including social guidance, will be experienced and understood against the background of personal history and how earlier experiences are made sense of. Therefore, any intentions of social others to guide a person are ‘played with’ and so modified; what is important is to examine how social guidance is received and dealt with.

### **On what this enquiry is based**

This book is the result of a shared activity of writing. It hopes to be an accessible theoretical exploration, offering an original perspective on developmental processes in the life course. Yet it has not grown out of nowhere; it implies a constant dialogue between four sources of knowledge. First, we draw on ‘classic’ authors – authors who are often considered as part of the ‘history’ of psychology and disregarded before the actual implications of their propositions have been fully understood. Here, we reread these authors and extract and expand important theoretical ideas, some of which have been overlooked, which can enrich and support our current exploration. Second, we draw on the theoretical reflection that each of the authors has developed in his or her field of expertise and we attempt to integrate these propositions. Third, we have been very attentive to daily experiences, people’s accounts of their life choices, usual and surprising forms of life – and so we draw on many journalistic, literary or artistic accounts of people’s lives as ‘data’ to exemplify and expand our reflections. And fourth, we also include current studies in various fields of psychology, for example, developmental, learning or social psychology, providing us with further, up-to-date factual or theoretical information. Yet to this needs to be added a fifth dimension – which is precisely given by the dialogical nature of this book, bringing each author to include his or her reflections on the expertise of the others or the material they have contributed. Within the framework given by the book, each author has quickly expanded his or her understanding and reflection, and so this book’s fifth dimension is the added creativity triggered by its very making.

### **Structure of the book**

The book is organized by the very idea that human beings’ life courses expand through sense-making along three dimensions – time, from the present to our past into the future, space, including the social, material

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and institutional framing of our experiences, and degrees of reality – or the gradual variations between what is experienced as real, imaginary or anything in between (what could be, what might perhaps happen, what will never happen). These three dimensions confer on the book its three-part structure. The first part of the book defines a theory of time to capture life courses. The second part theorizes the social spaces in which life courses unfold. The third part of the book considers the many ways in which humans can overcome the constraints of time and space, of temporality and social worlds.

The first part of the book emphasizes time. Chapter 1 brings to the fore a few basic theoretical ideas for a life-course psychology. It distinguishes between a view on development from the ‘outside’ – from a ‘neutral’ observer – which enables us to identify epigenetic processes as well as the dynamic, systemic nature of the life course, and an internal view, which accounts for semiotic processes – what enables human beings to make sense of what happens. Chapter 2 gives a phenomenological grounding to the first exploration and introduces the next chapters by giving various ‘inside’ accounts of what imagining one’s life is, at various ages. Hence it appears that a five-year-old, a young adult or an older person all enter in a certain way in to a dialogue between what is and what could be, and was once and what might be. On this basis, Chapter 3 explores theoretically imagination and its link to memory. It also attempts to show how the expansion or the direction of memory and imagination may vary according to one’s location in the life journey. Chapter 4 then proposes a theoretical model of time that might underlie our assumptions – the irreversibility of time – and findings – its flexibility.

The second part of the book then adds the spaces in which development occurs. Chapter 5 theoretically explores the nature of the ‘social frames’, or settings, in which people move over time. Chapter 6 explores the therapeutic framework as one type of social setting designed for change to happen. Learning sites are explored in Chapter 7 as another socially designed change-setting. Both settings have been the occasion of quite specialized analysis; bringing them together, as two variations of socially situated change, makes it possible to highlight processes of development and to expand our understanding of them.

This leads us to the third part of the book, which now considers time and space in combination with a third dimension: imagination. Chapter 8 indeed observes that as people move through a plurality of settings over time, they have to develop ways to maintain a sense of continuity, and also use the experience acquired in one framework in another. As imagination is what enables us to take distance and engage in transformation, it may thus play a key role in people’s ‘migrant’ lives. Chapter 9 then explores the

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fundamental playfulness of life as a core process of change. Yet in Chapter 10 we are reminded that it is also through these imaginative processes that people are most likely to be guided, unknowingly, by the discourse and values available in a society. Finally, Chapter 11 concentrates these reflections around a specific aspect of life – that of getting older.

The idea running through the book is that, beyond the constraints of time and social worlds, people develop a unique life melody; and so the book invites us to consider the processes by which these melodies are created. This book, which opens a new enquiry, still remains without conclusion. However, in the epilogue, we highlight the results of our theoretical exploration; we also take a reflective stance, which leads us to say more about the method used in this book and the epistemological status of the knowledge produced, inviting us, it is hoped, to another way of doing science.

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*Part I*

Time for development

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