

Sociocultural Psychology of the Lifecourse

Series Editor

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The Sociocultural Psychology of the Lifecourse book series seeks to further our knowledge of the development of people in their complex socio-cultural worlds, both empirically and theoretically. Its sociocultural psychological perspective proposes to account for the development of people as unique persons, with their perspective and subjectivity, within the social and cultural environments that guide them and yet which they can themselves transform. The book series showcases works that provide a complex understanding of development in the lifecourse, contribute to the theorization of the lifecourse and present original data – based on case studies, segments of lives, or trajectories of living. It will also include books which present synthetic theoretical, epistemological or methodological contributions. By documenting the richness of lives and developing the relevant theoretical tools, books in this series will make a unique contribution to sociocultural, developmental psychology, and to the study of the courses of lives.

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Mariann Märtsin

Identity Development in the Lifecourse

A Semiotic Cultural Approach to
Transitions in Early Adulthood

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Sociocultural Psychology of the Lifecourse

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The original version of this book has been revised, An error in the production process caused the author's affiliation to be corrected into the series editor's affiliation by mistake. This has been corrected in the copyright page and the cover.

*To Pille and Ülo
who taught me how to dream and how to work hard to catch my dreams*

Series Editor's Preface

Identity Development in the Lifecourse

This book explores the development of young people over time, as they leave their home country, go abroad and define their own goals and interests. It is about people's lives as they unfold, and as such, it narrates stories that could be that of many of us; it is also a theoretical book, asking fundamental questions about human development. For these two reasons, I am very happy to inaugurate this new series of book on the lifecourse with Mariann Märtsin's monograph.

The aim of this series is to investigate, in depth, the course of lives of people in their sociocultural environment. Although that is not a new question, researchers rarely take the time to fully focus on one person, or a small group of persons, to understand the specificities of the lives they are engaged in, in the times and places in which they live, which present them with specific challenges. Only such focus can enable us to identify the process by which people deal with life: how they understand themselves, their relation to others, how they imagine their future, and how they think that their past led them to their present. Indeed, not only do then people have to solve these issues once, but through time, they change, and their understanding of what is going also does; in the meantime, the environment in which they made their past choices, and the

one they will have to face, are themselves in transformation. Therein lies the challenge of a sociocultural psychology of the lifecourse: to rethink psychological theorising in light of the course of a situated life.

In *Identity development in the lifecourse: A semiotic cultural approach to transitions in early adulthood*, Mariann Märtsin gives herself the task of accounting for the lives of eight young people, born in Estonia, who decided to move the UK for their studies. Although this little adventure in people's lives may seem at first sight, anecdotic, it actually enables to reveal the richness and complexity of unfolding young lives in the twenty-first century. This is the strength of this monograph in lifecourse research: to turn a common fact into the site of acute and deep observations and render visible what is not. Mariann Märtsin proposes to consider the changes experienced by these young people as a double movement: a mobility, in geographical space, and a transition—a process of change initiated by ruptures—in the timespan of their lives. This double change engages people's beliefs about themselves, transforms their relationships to their families and friends, brings them to discover their strengths and vulnerabilities, to confront with other's representation of what life should be, and to re-examine their values and goals. The strength of the book is that this enables to build an original theory of identity: rather than being a structure, or a category, or a statement, identity is shown to be a semi-otic process, a future-oriented guidance constantly renegotiated in the light of past, current and future experiences. In what follows, I wish to highlight some of the key contributions of this elegant monograph.

Forever, Young

First, topic wise, youth and the extended adulthood has been a preferred topic of psychologists and identity researchers for a long time; a landmark in that field is, of course, the work of Erik Erikson (Erikson, 1968). Since then, societal transformation has led to a double dissolution of the thresholds traditionally bordering adolescence—in it, with the lowering of age of puberty, and the increase of a 'youth' fashion for children—and out of it, with 'youth' conduct admitted now in people all along the lifecourse as lifestyle, family arrangement, professional careers and body-care have been deeply transformed. Whether youth has been simply extended into

'late adolescence' or 'emerging adulthood' or whether adulthood still exists at all or not (Arnett, 2006; Hendry & Kloep, 2007), there is still an effect of 'first time' for many people engaged in their youth—and foremost, this is the time during which, for the first time, they have to engage their symbolic responsibility and define a system of orientation that functions as a moral or personal compass (Schwartz, 2016; Zittoun, 2006, 2007). Over the past ten years, the field of 'youth studies' and 'emerging adulthood' has considerably expanded in social sciences and psychology, with a more clear recognition of the tensions that young people are facing, now coined by authors as specificity to that period in life. Hence, Threadgold conceives young people

as figures of struggle (Threadgold, 2017), reflexively positioned between the doxic governmental promises—study hard, work hard, the meritocracy will see you prevail—and the everyday reality of precarious labour markets, political upheaval led by conservative and reactionary forces, and global risks such as climate change. (Threadgold, 2019, p. 5)

Comparably, Schwartz identifies the 'two-faced' nature of the period (which he calls a stage), "a time of great optimism but also great uncertainty, a time of increasing well-being but also characterised by the onset of anxiety and depressive disorders in many people" (Schwartz, 2016, p. 307). In his review, he also notes that predictors of outcomes of that period are parents, peers and identity and that these factors must be related. But how to articulate the demands of the socio-economic environment and people's own need to explore their world, how to take in account the sets of tensions and relations in which people are located and their unique ways of handling with them? How to be a psychologist, studying the psyche, without being blind to the sociocultural environment? This is precisely where the qualitative, processual approach proposed by Mårtsin can make her unique contribution, approaching young adults without the preconceptions of current studies (e.g., Côté, 2014), from a more distant, developmental and theoretical stance. From such a perspective, indeed, young adults are people engaged in liminal transitions in the courses of their lives—these have specificities, notably socioculturally defined, yet their development depends on much more general psychological processes.

Student Mobility

The socio-historico-cultural context of the study is the early twenty-first century, a decade after the opening of former 'Eastern' countries to the UK job and study market (Estonia joined the UE in 2004). It is also a period where it became increasingly clear, for young people who want to make a 'career', that a stay abroad is an implicit demand of a certain range of professions, and for longer academic involvement. Of course, these demands apply to a selective part of the population and a certain range of socio-economical domains (Cairns, 2014; Cairns, Cuzzocrea, Briggs, & Veloso, 2017). Also, these demands do not have the same meaning for residents from various European countries; the 'freedom' of moving abroad may have been for many a 'forced push' (Salamońska & Czeranowska, 2019). And these socio-economic factors may still be independent of, or accompanied by, personal life projects and an imagination of places or of oneself in the future (Salazar, 2011). Academic mobility is thus, again, a double-sided experience: if it is, mostly, constructive in terms of experience, training, acquisition of diploma, and so on, it can also be financially grieving (as in student loan), relationally demanding (Schaer, Dahinden, & Toader, 2017), and, as the cases here reveal, affectively difficult. If there is a growing literature examining such mobility from a sociological, geographical, educational or anthropological and clinical perspectives (Saravanan, Alias, & Mohamad, 2017), little is known on how people experience this tension—again, between social guidance and personal needs and aspiration—and deal with it, and little is done to describe and analyse such tension in psychological, theoretical terms—there lies this book's second contribution.

Studying Development

To study development, one has to capture change (Valsiner, 1988, 2007); with a particular care for being consistent with her theoretical approach, Mariann Märtsin can achieve this thanks to a third remarkable feature of her work: her longitudinal, mobile fieldwork. Märtsin, indeed, has fol-

lowed up with the young adults that became part of her study during one year, interviewing them three times each; she thus could capture, at the scale of a year, how people experienced change: how they anticipated what was about to come on the basis of their past experience, how they experienced these new situations, how they revised their past imagination of the future and how they could now develop new ones. Only such real-time, developmental techniques enable capturing the extreme changeability of experiences of change (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010)—especially when people are fully within a transition or, precisely, experiencing the ‘zone’ of liminality (Stenner, 2017a). In addition, Märtsin displays here methodological creativity—adjusting this longitudinal methodology to the need of a mobile group, thus turning it into a ‘mobile method’ and including an interesting invitation to draw—which didn’t work with all. Case studies, located in the environment of people’s real lives, differs from the reassuring, controlled environment of the lab or even the standardised interviews—here, the researcher’s flexibility and empathy for these persons were key in co-constructing a narrative of their lives.

A Semiotic Theory of Identity: Meta-Signs and Borders

The fourth, and main, contribution of Mariann Märtsin’s book is theoretical: she proposes a new conceptualisation of identity as a semiotic process. Instead of seeing identity as categories (I am an X) or a series of fluctuating positions (I as-an-Y, I as-as-Z), she starts from the fundamental fluidity of our being, conceived from a semiotic perspective, in time. She thus writes (emphasis added):

I conceptualise identity as a semiotic field, because it includes a wide range of interrelated meanings tied to different aspects of our way of being. I consider it to be a fuzzy field, because we cannot clearly define its perimeter and boundaries, we don’t quite know where it starts and where it ends, what belongs to it and what does not. *Importantly, identity as a field of hyper-generalised metasigns regulates our movement into the future, that is our process of becoming.* (Märtsin, p. 38)

Doing so, Mårtsin proposes a reconciliation between semiotic approaches to development, which emphasise meaning-making, and identity approaches, which, even in their more performative versions, tend to be more static or to entify processes (Valsiner, 1988). Even more, taking very seriously Vygotsky's idea of higher semiotic—cultural mediation (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018), as worked out over the recent years by Valsiner (Valsiner, 2019) and Salvatore (Salvatore, 2016), she conceives of identity as meta-signs—generalisation from experience, which can, ahead of us, guide our conduct towards an imagined future. Yet, these are constantly readjusted, in a dialectical movement, through what is and what could be—which can only ever be guessed, or wished for, again and again. This is beautifully expressed:

The way I see it human meaning making is thus an ongoing process in which relative stability is created from permanent impermanence, just like the maintenance of the upright body posture and balance is achieved through continuous correction of instantaneous imbalanced moments. (Mårtsin, p. 39)

The second part of this proposition is that, within these semiotic processes, the identity dynamics may produce 'border' effects. Such idea is necessary to account for the moments in which people facing change or diversity are drawn to reassess that they are still the same—and nor something else, typically when experiencing ruptures, facing change or otherness (Erikson, 1968; Hviid, 2012). For, after all, feeling 'the same' is as important as changing. Mariann Mårtsin understands borders in a semiotic way, as something which can be constantly redrawn: "identity can be conceptualized as a semiotic border-making process, where borders between various others, between self and others and between past, present and future self are constantly drawn and redrawn" (Mårtsin, p. 18).

The concept of border is a complex one, imported in cultural psychology through mathematics and conceived in extremely abstract terms (Valsiner, 2014). By doing so, it enables to include phenomena otherwise identified under parent concepts (e.g., boundary, category, limit, etc.), addressing slightly different issues. In this book, Mårtsin defines two main types of border: spatial and temporal ones.

In terms of space, she notes that a geographical movement—an actual mobility, or a real (national) border being crossed, may correspond to a variety of more psychological, semiotic work. She identifies what appears to be three subtypes. One, typical for social sciences, is the border brought about when people are confronted with what they perceive as difference, in others: I become part of a ‘we’ and these people then become part of ‘they’. Here, ‘border’ has a meaning very close to that conceptualised as ‘boundary dynamic’, or boundary-work, in current social anthropology (Eade, 2013; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Lamont, Pendergrass, & Pachucki, 2015). In their synthesis of existing work, Lamont and Molnár thus, for instance, distinguish between symbolic and social boundaries:

Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality. (...) Social boundaries are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities. (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168)

Hence, when the young people interviewed by Märtsin suddenly feel that they are ‘more’ Estonian now in the UK, and ‘we’ are so different from them, their border-meaning work corresponds to such boundary dynamics. However, being at a higher level of abstraction, the concept of border also affords other, more evanescent uses. Hence, a second modality of border is that taking place between competing meaning fields, for a given person at a specific moment, such as one occurring when a person hesitates to interpret others as ‘real’ or ‘fake’ friends; such border zone, Märtsin suggests, is liminal enough to be the zone of potential emergences of new meaning. A third type is the border between the person and her environment; here “border making process [are] a temporary stabilization of the mutually transformative flow between person and environment” (Märtsin, p. 171).

The main temporal border identified by Märtsin is then that constantly taking place “between past and future”: “as humans we always make meanings, including meanings about the persons we want to be or

become, ahead of time in order to pre-adapt to the unpredictable but anticipated future” (Märtsin, p. 173). Here, border takes a meaning closer to work on phenomena of the proximal zones of development, whether triggered by others or self-generated via inner dialogue and through imagination (Josephs, Valsiner, & Sorgan, 1999; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2014; Zittoun & Valsiner, 2016).

Put together, these propositions thus allow Märtsin to see identity as a fluid process, in the making, constantly engaged in defining temporary goals for itself, which act as meta-signs, a form of self-promoter signs. This sense-crunching advance that is life then hits obstacles—the border, when sense-making gets interrupted (as in semantic barriers (Gillespie, 2008)) or suspended, confronting people with ambivalence and uncertainty, which may also trigger the emergence of newness.

In some sense, this intuition of the conceptual potential of ‘border’ joins the concept of liminality, which has also been analysed as operating in time, space, as well as between facts and fiction, and eventually become disquietingly expanded (Stenner, 2017b). In addition, Märtsin suggests, in a poetic conclusion, these semiotic border work leave traces—knots in the threaded carpet that is one’s life, thus creating a unique pattern. Living, one engages these semiotic dynamics that participate in creating the unique melody of one’s life (Zittoun et al., 2013).

Towards a General Sociocultural Theory of Development

Thanks to her theoretical propositions, Märtsin makes a series of interesting observations which find echoes in recent and past work, on other case studies, at times addressed with other conceptual tools. In order to indicate possible roads for generalisation across case studies, I wish to pick on two of these facts.

First, Märtsin observes the importance of friends in young people’s transitions: there are the friends that support change and transformation towards the new life one is living, and these that block us because they retain us towards what we used to be, or what some think we should be.

One of the interviewees, Mari, thus finds new friends in the UK: “I felt that we think in the same way, that we have similar goals in life, exactly these girls also felt that they want to travel and see the world and experience different things and so on”. As Märtsin comments, such friends “represent a voice that strengthens and supports Mari’s new self-understandings” (p.114). This, in some ways, goes in the same direction as her observation that these young people’s need of social recognition through university success: former good students, they are now exposed to the most demanding programme, in a foreign language, and sometimes to challenging teachers. Here as well, support through peer groups is important; hence, Säde can make the experience of being competent and supported in one of her reading groups (p.132). Altogether, this suggests something not only about the importance of friendship during youth, which is well documented, but something about the importance of peers, or significant others, in order to make sense of new experience. It is perhaps precisely within these safe and trusting relationships that some part of the affective load of the new experiences can be absorbed, named, discussed, and thus, distanced, semioticed: peer groups or reading groups may, in such way, work as ‘semiotic chambers’, supporting that hard work of thinking and developing.

The importance of such groups to ‘detoxicate’ difficult and challenging experiences has been documented in very different contexts—inner-youth groups (Heath, 2004), minority students (Walker, 2014), youth at war (Daiute, 2013), refugee experience (Womersley, 2019)—where the importance of affective support, narration and symbolisation has been shown. What seems new here is to connect such observation with a *semiotic* understanding of identity. For if identity is semiotic, and semiotic work is the foremost elaboration of affect that grows in social and cultural interactions (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018), then the role of positive social relationships in semiotic identity work is to be underlined. This is a point not to be forgotten in a sociocultural psychology of development: one needs both signs and culture, and significant human relationships, to develop.

Second, Märtsin describes Tania as a young woman who used to go to church every Sunday and was raised in a conservative environment; now

in the UK, she is much more freely experimenting what life has to offer. She reports Tania's words:

All these people that surround you, they take things very easily ... If there is a party, then it is a party, if we drink, then we drink, that kind of thing ... And I feel I've started to take things more easily as well. I'm not sure yet, if it is right or wrong. Sometimes I feel guilty. How come? Before I would've never had parties like this or something. But now it's like ... Sometimes I don't know what's happening to me. (p. 97)

Tania has moved geographically and is brought to new environments and settings, where the cultural subsystem and the social implicit rules are different from the one she is used to and has internalised. She is learning (or socialised) into these social frames; yet these new conducts, in her current proximal spheres of experience, trigger distal experiences, and within them, the voices of distant others—her mother, perhaps, her past values or meta-signs—creating tensions. This intense inner dialogue is thus expressed by her language, with interrogations ('How come?') and contradictions ('But'). More interestingly, she finally states: "I don't know what's happening of me". This kind of utterance expresses this moment of self-realisation: if I am not whom I used to think I was becoming, then what am I? If my fundamental notions of good and bad are shaken—the core of one's system of orientation, where does it go?

Interestingly, we observed almost the same sentence expressed by another young woman ("I don't know what is becoming of me"), far from home, for the first time dating young man although she came from a conservative family—but this time, in the UK during WWII (Zittoun, Aveling, Gillespie, & Cornish, 2012; Zittoun & Gillespie, in press). Whether this says something about young womanhood, or perhaps—and still needs to be documented—about moments of self-realisation during development, needs to be clarified; but the movement, marked by such utterances, is definitely worth mentioning. Indeed, development in the lifecourse, and especially during youth, may especially demand, in some cases, the radical transformation of people's core values, basis of their system of orientation—called the meta-meta-signs. This can be for the best, bringing people to progressive freedom from semiotic con-

straints internalised along their educational trajectory; it can also be for the worst, when people are brought to extreme actions which force them to change these core values, yet alienate them from their sense of themselves (as, for instance, in children soldiers). Yet even there, from a socio-cultural developmental perspective, and with a semiotic approach to identity, one can conceive that development is never final and that there is always a possibility to transform even these core values. In some ways, ethics are at the core of our being—they can be our moral compass, and as such, sometimes, they can be readjusted.

Opening

In the following pages, thus, the reader will accompany young people in their life adventure. With her gentle listening, Mariann Märtsin does not only present us with the ups and downs of their experience, but she also builds a challenging and promising semiotic theory of identity. On the way, youth, mobility and methodology are questioned, but more importantly, a real processual understanding of identity development is proposed. Based on carefully documented case studies, this book thus triggers and nourishes dialogues with other cases of courses of lives. Thanks to both its theoretical propositions and its rich case studies, it thus becomes an important voice in the joint venture of a better understanding of development in the lifecourse.

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