Chapter 18
Dynamics of Life-Course Transitions: A Methodological Reflection

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The French movie "Life Is a Long Quiet River" (« La vie est un long fleuve tranquille », Chatiliez, 1988) compares the fates of two children, born in contrasting social classes and exchanged at birth, and plays with the unpredictable curves and bends of their developmental histories, which eventually bring them to acquire the skills and knowledge that they might have acquired in their original milieu. The ironic title strongly suggests that life is *not* a long quite river, and illustrates two long-time known principles of development. It shows that the development of a child or a person is not linear, and cannot be predicted; it also shows that many different ways can lead a person to develop a given skill or understanding (Vygotsky, 1929/1993). Admitting these principles has consequences for the study of human development: life-courses appear characterized not only by the regular and progressive establishment of regularities and continuities, but also, and mainly, by the moments in which these continuities are interrupted, reoriented, or challenged.

Such moments are interesting for several reasons. Firstly, at a theoretical level, it is at points of bifurcation that the person or the organism has to develop new conduct. Secondly, at an empirical level, lives in contemporary societies are exposing people to interruptions to what appears continuous to them—for example through job reassignments, demands to engage in continuous education, changes in family composition, the introduction of new technologies at home or in the workplace, and so on and so forth. Thirdly, at a methodological level, these points constitute "natural change laboratories" in people's lives. In effect, experimental settings usually create tasks or strange situations to which people have to answer; in these situations, researchers examine people's answers or the processes that lead them to these. Ruptures in life produce equivalent tasks, or strange situations, calling for an answer—and thus processes whereby these answers, or adjustment are produced, can be observed; I call them here *transitions*.

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J. Valsiner et al. (eds.), *Dynamic Process Methodology in the Social and Developmental Sciences,* 405
DOI 10.1007/978-0-387-95922-1_18, © Springer Science+Business Media LLC 2009

My main proposition is that the couple of notions "rupture" and "transition" offers a powerful methodological unit of analysis for the study of development in life trajectories. I emphasize the heuristic power and the relevance of such unit of analysis, the difficulties it raises, and some strategies to circumvent these. I finally suggest how the notions might be used to develop a rich understanding of changes in life-trajectories.

Studying Development

The reflection on the study of life-trajectory proposed here belongs to a certain orientation within developmental psychology; I present here four of its assumptions, for they raise some methodological difficulties that will have to be addressed.

Firstly, the study of development is the study of processes whereby change occurs. This might seem obvious; however, many studies which might appear developmental do not examine processes. For example, measuring a person's ability to answer to a test at time X, and measuring the same person's ability a time X+n, enables to compare two results at two points in time. One might see that this enables to identify some developmental change of the person's abilities between X and X+n. However, such comparison does not say anything about the process by which the person producing a result at time X has becomes the person producing a result at time X+n. A comparison of X and X+n is a comparison of outcomes, not of processes. In contrast the process of changes can be examined (Valsiner, 2007). This does not mean that the person has to be totally changing all the time. Describing development requires to account both for the continuity and the changes in which a developing organism, person or system is necessarily engaged (Erikson, 1968; James, 1890).

Secondly, the development of a person is a complex phenomenon, involving biological, psychological, but also interpersonal and social processes. The approach chosen here considers as central the "social" or "cultural" nature of human conduct. The social or cultural component of psychological processes can be observed at different levels of analysis. It can be observed at the level of intrapersonal phenomena (e.g., analyzing a person's internal dialogues, as echoes of other social situations, Bakhtin, 1982; Markovà, 2003). It is obviously visible at the level of interpersonal processes (e.g., interactive dialogues, Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2006), and at the level of intra-group or inter-groups dynamics. Finally, the social nature of human conduct can be observed when people deal with ideological phenomena at a societal level (e.g., the emergence of social representations in face of a new societal event) (Doise, 1982; Perret-Clermont, 2004). Although these levels of analysis are often separated due to methodological and conceptual reasons, in reality, changes identified at one level have actually consequences for phenomena observed at another level (Fogel, 2006; Fogel, King, & Shanker, 2008; Vasiner, 2007). Hence, a young man's development can be observed at the level of the change his perception of himself (intrapersonal level of analysis) or at the level of his changing relationships with girls (interpersonal); however there are good reasons to believe that both events are related. Or a country's new policy against foreigners (societal level of

analysis) can bring people to deal very differently with their neighbors in everyday life (interpersonal level). Some authors thus speak of the interdependency between ontogenetic processes (the person's development), micro-genesis (changes occurring as interactions between the person and her social environment unfolds) and socio-genesis (changes in the social environment, whereby social representations develop) (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990). In the case of the study of life-trajectories—which are always unfolding in diverse contexts, and experience by a person through a longer period of time—change can only be explained by taking in account at least intra and interpersonal changes and their interactions (see e.g., Gillespie, 2005, on Malcolm X, or Zittoun, 2003, on Carl Rogers).

Thirdly, the perspective chosen here considers that the person, constantly interacting with others and her environment, is also engaged in negotiating the meaning of these situations (Bruner, 1990). These processes of meaning making are rendered possible through diverse forms of semiotic mediation (Vygotsky, 1930). Processes of internalization, by which shared meanings become internalized, that is intra-psychological, and externalization, when the latter find a sharable form in interpersonal situations, play a major role in such processes (see e.g., Valsiner & Rosa, 2007). Meaning making can only be observed via these processes. One cannot know what a person thinks about A; one can know in which circumstances the person has been exposed to A (i.e., the conditions of a possible internalization), and what she says or does about A (what she externalizes)—and it is only on this basis that the person's thinking about A can be inferred.

Fourth, as any other science, developmental psychology aims at proposing general understandings of some phenomena. It is obvious that describing the development of one person in one circumstance is not enough. Yet there are different ways to construct general knowledge; I will here consider case studies. Case studies enable to account for the complexity of phenomena as identified above. How then to link and bring together different case studies? It is impossible to construct an "average" case; one would thus loose what makes the interest of a case. Rather, one can use a more formal language, and thus sketch a model of processes. This model can then be applied on another situation, and modified so as to account for its specificities, and to a third, and so on. A model hence developed enables to highlight relationships between significant components of situations. In turn, case-studies can be analyzed as exemplifying some variations of these relations (e.g., Branco, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this paper, I clarify a set of notions which enable to identify some relationships occurring in great variety of cases. These notions can then be used to work towards generalized knowledge.

Methodological Difficulties

The history of psychology repeatedly shows how difficult these principles are to follow when it comes down to empirical research. The major difficulty is to capture the time-dimension, that is, the processual nature of the phenomenon under study. Indeed, any form of description of a phenomenon requires stepping out of time. Data

collection always requires decomposing the flow of time into units so as to keep a semiotic trace of a given phenomenon, through different techniques: pictures, films, paper–pen, etc. This is even stronger when the persons' perspectives are questioned in real-time: they then have to comment on their actions or to write some notes about their current state of mind—and doing so they definitely take distance from the flow of time and experience. Also, change can take place in time-scales that are difficult to observe continuously (as a life-time) or with accuracy (as an emergent idea). Even analyzing data is a way of distancing from the flow of time: creating categories of events occurred in a classroom interaction looses their location in duration. Finally, it is very difficult to engage in a real-time enquiry without affecting the phenomena itself. The second difficulty is that it is very difficult to observe more than one level of change in one single operation, such as micro-genesis and ontogenesis; usually, research chooses to focus on one level, and then misses important aspects of change. Thirdly, it is easier to observe externalization than to capture internalization; and it is simpler to capture it, when it is verbal. Consequently, many studies focus exclusively on verbal interactions when interested in psychological change, hence loosing the perspective of the person. Fourthly, simplifications in view of generalisation often intervene early in the study; as richness of the data is lost, further theorization and identification of theoretical equivalences with other cases is often prevented (Overton, 2002; Wagoner, 2007, 2009).

The methodological reflection presented in this chapter is based on the four developmental assumptions presented above, and addresses these methodological difficulties. It examines how the notions of rupture and transition can be used to study life-trajectories. It thus pursues a reflection undertaken by me and groups of researchers in which I have been collaborating over the past 10 years. As we have been exploring a wide range of methodological strategies for the study of transitions, empirical examples are primarily taken from our work. Other studies are also mentioned to expand or contrast our choices. In no sense this is a review of the literature on transitions.

Transitions to Approach Development

A powerful meta-theoretical frame for understanding life-trajectories is currently given by complex system theory. In rough lines, in such meta-theoretical frame, the development of an organism can be described as a constantly changing adjustment between the organism and its environment, going through a series of relatively stable periods, alternating with more important changes due to brutal ruptures within the adjustment process (van Geert, 2003; von Bertalanffy, 1993). These moments of ruptures, which can be facilitated or provoked by internal factors as well as by external ones, can be described as points of bifurcation, from which the organism can develop in one, or the other direction. This analysis can be applied to micro-processes of change, such as the development of a cell, or at the ontogenetic level, such as the trajectory of an individual in his context. For example, the life of Jack

London, as described in his autobiographical novel *John Barleycorn* published in 1913 (London, 1998), is filled with such moments of bifurcation. As he was a child, his parents moved frequently; born in a farm, he arrived in town and was asked to sell newspapers in the street, aged ten. On the one hand, the autonomy he thus gained enabled him to explore the library and to read his first books—a revelation, which appears decisive for his future life (Sutherland, 1998, p. 214); on the other hand, being in the street and delivering newspapers, he also discovered the life of pubs. The rupture (of changing habitat) opened new pathways (commitment with books, relationship to alcohol), which have different consequences. London early engages in drinking, and risks to remain in that path; yet later incidents bring him to change pathway—such as for example, the love for an educated woman, which seems to have encouraged him to start adult education and to be accepted at college. Another example of significant bifurcation is reported by him: at a period in which he tried to live from his writing without succeeding, he was offered a stable position in the local post-office; he refused because the postmaster who offered him the job upset him (London, 1998, p. 145); forced to pursue writing, he started to be abundantly published soon after. Would he have accepted the stable job, it seems, he would not have become the author we know. Jack London thus faces many bifurcation points, and following one way will have unpredictable consequences. However, although a given option never comes back twice, alternative routes lead to equivalent points.

In an open system, two contrasting types of changes can be identified. A first type participates to the continuous, regular evolution of the system. These are part of transitive dynamics, or circular phenomena. For example, during the period in which Jack London is able to live from his writing, he sells a story, earns money, can pay his bills, and thus can spend all his mornings writing—and so can he write quality stories and sell them. In contrast, an intransitive change breaks such a circle: for example, at the end of this writing period, Jack London is challenged by a group of young men to participate to a drinking contest—unable to refuse, he drinks, and next day, is unable to write, and later, he fails to give a planned talk (London, 1998, pp. 151–153). Accepting the drinking contest constitutes a rupture in London's forced sobriety at this time. This event constitutes a rupture of the "virtuous circle" of a given suite of phenomena; it necessary calls for a new arrangement in the system; such a change can be called intransitive.

A rupture signs the end of a mode of adjustment; after such an event, the routine changes are invalidated; new dynamics have to be established. Trivially, think about book arrangements: for a while, every new book bought by a person finds a place in her bookshelf; at some point, one book comes, and the bookshelf is full. At this point, as the normal course of things is interrupted, the person might start to imagine what new furniture she will buy or build. Hence, a rupture is a call for new ideas, new solutions, or new ways of acting or thinking. If life always requires regular change, as in transitive processes, a rupture calls for more, deeper, more substantive changes; in that sense a rupture is a *catalyst* for intransitive change.

From a developmental perspective, such intransitive changes following ruptures are of greatest interest; this is where newness is called for, and can emerge. This

observation has to be translated in notions that have some heuristic power, that is, that enable us to account for actual observations, and that permit such observations and analysis to be connected to the existing developmental and learning literature.

The notion of *transition* offers an actionable notion to study these changes. At a theoretical level, it can be quite easily connected to these of rupture, or bifurcation. At an empirical level, there is a growing literature on transitions in the life-course (see Levy, Ghisletta, Le Goff, Spini, & Widmer, 2005, for a recent overview), which can then be discussed on this basis and integrated in a wider reflection on development.

The Notion of Transition

Transitions can be defined as processes of catalysed change due to a rupture, and aiming at a new sustainable fit between the person and her current environment. The notion of transition can be easily connected to other constructs in developmental psychology. This notion thus requires, as in any systemic approach, an initial *rupture* in the system constituted by the person and her environment, system that can be defined in different manners according to the chosen level of analysis. The notion of *rupture* designates the processes called *irritation* (Peirce, 1878), *crisis* (Vygotsky, 2004, 1930; Erikson, 1950/1995, 1968; James, 1890), *desequilibration* (Piaget, 1966/2003), *challenge* (Smelser, 1980), *critical event* (Wapner & Demick, 2005) or *turning point* (Rutter, 1994) in psychology. The notion of *transition* designates the processes captured by these of *re-equilibration* subsequent to ruptures, of *restoration* of one's sense of continuity and integrity (Carugati, 2004; Erikson, 1968; James, 1892; Palmonari, 1993; for reviews see Elcheroth et al., 2003; van Geert, 1988; Wapner & Craig-Bray, 1992).

The notion of transition is preferred to competing notions for a few theoretical reasons. The powerful *equilibration* (Piaget, 1964/1967) notion has been developed to account for the development of intra-psychological, mental structures. In contrast, ruptures-transitions can more directly account for the adjustment between the person and her socio-cultural environment. The notion of *crises* and its resolution was proposed by Erikson to discuss key-points in life trajectories: a crisis would for him designate "a necessary turn, a crucial moment in development, when it has to choose between ways in which are distributed the further resources of growth recovery and differentiation" (Erikson 1968/1972, p. 11, m.t.). However the notion was developed in a theoretical frame which considered a certain number of normative crises in a life-trajectory and strongly suggested which of their outcomes would be preferable. Also, it is now strongly associated to Erikson's work on adolescence identity-crises. In contrast, processes of *transitions* can more easily be heard as leading to undetermined outcomes, are less specifically associated to a given period of the life-course, and are not limited to identity processes.

From Static to Dynamic Understandings of Transitions

The notion of transition is useful only if it can account for transformations. The term transition of course suggests that something is being changed from one state to another, or from A to B. In the major part of the contemporary literature on transitions, the authors start by defining the two contexts, stages or phases A and B. The term transition then designates the fact that B replaces A.

Having to account for phenomena that have a great social or educational relevance, many authors have used the notion of transition as its common sense usefully designates the idea of the passage from A to B. There is thus a wide literature on the school-to-work transition, the transition from secondary school to university, the transition between work places, and so forth. Another family of studies is related to the study of the life-course. Here as well, the notion is often used to designate the move from one stage or one social role to another one, such as the transition to adulthood, parenthood, retirement, and so forth. The notion of transition is very appealing to designate these changes; however, its seductive appearance is rarely questioned. Yet it raises some issues: firstly, used in this way, it assumes that A and B are clearly identified. Secondly, if one does not question the processes involved in what bring A to transit towards B, the notion of designates the magical replacement of one state by another—*B rather than A*.

Three main criticisms can be addressed to approaches that use unreflectively the notion of transition. First, because of their focus on endpoints, they tend to leave the processes of change out of their investigation (among them, especially the studies that compare some data produced in B with some data produced in A). Second, identifying *B-rather-than-A* issues often brings to enquire about normative changes in a given social space or life-trajectory. Normative changes require some stability of the environment. However, at a social level, contemporary social spaces and trajectories are in rapid evolution; at the individual level, individual trajectories tend to be non linear, individualized and going through frequent changes. In contemporary liberal societies, starting a job or studying, raising children or mating, can happen many times in a life trajectory, due to changes of the economical world, the technological environment, transformations of values and cultural exchanges (Perret-Clermont, Resnick, Pontecorvo, Zittoun, & Burge, 2004). An empirical priority is thus not to study stability and norms, but rather to examine changes and bifurcations in life trajectories. Thirdly, identifying and labeling one transition (e.g., school-to-work, to adulthood, etc.) easily hides the fact that, in a complex system, a change is usually accompanied by a whole series of related adjustments.

A contrasting approach to transitions considers that it is precisely the processes whereby A becomes B that are relevant. The focus is on A *becoming* B, on the mergence of A into B, or on the emergence of B out of A. Of course, this can be done at various level of analysis—the micro-processes of interpersonal adjustment, wider identity transformation, or more complex configuration of interactions between

people and their social and material environment. The following paragraphs explore various aspects of dynamic transitions.

Perceived Ruptures

In the developmental perspective proposed here, meaning processes—whereby people confer sense to the situation, to their experience, or to times to come, are central. If changes occur, they require some sense-making; reversely, sense-making dynamics often follow experiences perceived as ruptures by people.

Methodologically, studies on transitions need to identify the rupture point that justifies their enquiry. Ruptures are often identified on the basis of an external criteria, for example on the basis of unquestioned social representations (e.g., the transition to adulthood is mostly expected to be problematic), on the basis of observable facts (e.g., difficulties of adjustment during the school-to-work transition), or on the basis of other criteria defined by the researcher. Of course, sometimes, these periods or events are also perceived as significant by the person.

The study of ruptures and transition is a theoretical construct; yet it attempts to capture some phenomenological reality. If an event is studied as a rupture that is likely to bring a person or an organism to engage in changes, then the organism or the person under study must perceive the event as a rupture, in some respect. In other words, with other developmental psychologists, I consider that transitions to be studied have to follow ruptures perceived by persons (see also, van Geert, 1988; Wapner & Craig-Bray, 1992; Wapner & Demick, 2005).

Locating Ruptures

Whether a rupture is identified by a researcher or by the persons under study, it is often difficult to identify its actual, factual, objective causes. On the one hand, some actual causes can be very remote from the experience of the person, and what is actually perceived as a rupture is often a far and unpredictable repercussion of the initial change (e.g., as a result of war, a young woman might be exposed to forms of courtship that are experienced as a rupture in her identity as a woman, Zittoun, Aveling, Gillespie, & Cornish, in press). On the other hand, some ruptures are induced by processes of transitions in which the person is already engaged (e.g., a person might be proposed a better professional position, which generates a rupture, as a result of the skills acquired during a previous transition). Additionally, if the researcher has often good reasons to believe that an event is a potential rupture, the study of individual cases reveals numerous surprises. For example, starting university in a foreign town is often perceived as rupture, but not so much for children of diplomats who have changed schools and life settings regularly every few years during their childhood (Gyger Gaspoz, in preparation; Zittoun, 2006a). Experiences

of rupture do not need to be caused by a single cut event; they can also progressively emerge as a result of transformations of the field, such as for example when people have the experience of a growing ambivalence or uncertainty in their life (see e.g., Zittoun et al., in press).

One possible distinction among ruptures that can be perceived by a person can be proposed as follows. If ruptures have to do with a person's adjustment with her environment, then they can be either due to a perceived mismatch between the person's ability to act or modes of thinking and the actual social, material, and symbolic environment, or to a perceived mismatch in her own system of understanding. In the first case, a person's intending to pursue his professional activities might thus be confronted to the fact that he is made redundant. In the second case, a person's non-violent values might be contradicted to the fact that she acted violently in a confrontation with a member of her family. Of course, a distant event can be the objective "cause" of the rupture; yet this event has to find a translation in one or more aspects of the person's daily life. For example, the outbreak of a World War II could become a rupture for a person, not in itself, but once it caused a shortage of petrol and thus rendered impossible her daily activity in the family garage, and also, because it questioned the belief that World War I had been "a war to ends of war," transmitted through the parent's narrative (Zittoun, Cornish, Gillespie, & Aveling, 2008).

Inter- and Intra-Psychological Processes

In the light of what precedes, in order to account for psychological development, it is necessary to account both for intra-psychological changes and for interpersonal changes. Intra and interpersonal changes are usually related. It is admitted that Vygotsky's work has shown how interpersonal dynamics can lead to intrapersonal changes (e.g., the mastery of communicative language changes modes of thinking). Yet the process is bidirectional: changing one's way of thinking also changes one's action in the world (Vygotsky, 1934/1997). These bidirectional changes are often non-linear and not strictly predictable. For example, it is not because a person takes German classes (interpersonal phenomenon) that she will immediately start to think in German (intrapersonal process); she might have to wait until she lives in a German speaking environment, that circumstances requires from her to take an active role, etc., before she starts to realize that she speaks and dreams in German. The notions of rupture and transition thus aim at capturing both intra and interpersonal processes of change and their dynamic interrelations.

Processes of Transitions

In our work, we have proposed to examine systematically three interrelated transition processes: these connected with *identity definition*, perception or positioning,

these connected to *learning*, or also to defining new ways of acting or skills, and these more related to *sense*, values and emotions (Perret-Clermont & Zittoun, 2002; Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson, & Psaltis, 2003; Zittoun, 2005, 2006a; Zittoun et al., 2008). Doing so, we mainly want to emphasize the interrelations of dynamics captured by different theoretical constructs, due to different research traditions studying changes. Identity dynamics have been the object of studies inspired by Erikson (1968), and have been approached as part of the processes of becoming a member in approaches primarily interested in socialization and affiliation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). *Learning* of knowledge, skills and competences is the main focus of studies in transitions implying moves from one formal institution to another. Issues of sense making in life-transitions are approached in terms of *narratives* (Bruner, 1990; McAdams & Logan, 2006) or of *representations* of a problem or of the future (Masdonati, 2007). Studies of meaning are still a minority.

Note however that meaning issues have been the main interests of approaches studying transitions in traditional societies. These are described as relatively homogeneous, and as usually providing people with symbolic means to canalize changes and transitions: rituals and collective narrative are there to confer meaning to childbirth, weddings or death. In our occidental liberal societies, the abundance of available symbolic means paradoxically prevents people to find any ready made symbolic formulation of life events. This means that rendering changes and transitions meaningful becomes a more personal matter. This does not mean that people's need to confer sense to events has diminished. At the contrary, as a heavier demand is put on people who have to construct a symbolic understanding of more frequent life transitions, sense making processes become a key component of transitions processes.

A close attention to the three dynamics and their interrelations appears of great importance. On the one hand, it is heuristically powerful for analyzing and accounting for empirical facts. Hence, recent studies in vocational training show that one cannot understand learning and resistance to learning without a close attention to the identity dynamics involved (Billett, 2003). Other studies show how much these resistances are due to how much people can confer sense to the objects of knowledge (Rochex, 1998). Even more, the three aspects are constantly interrelated: knowing something new, questions who one is, and in turn, the meaning of the fact of being engaged in such learning (Hundeide, 2004; Zittoun, 2006a, 2008).

Rupture-Transitions as an Unit of Analysis: Methodological Challenges

The notion of transition, or more exactly, the pair rupture-transitions, is proposed as unit of analysis to study life trajectories, enabling to capture processes of change, and the person's perspective (Zittoun et al., 2003). Transitions can thus be seen as processes of reorganization of a system in which people's interpretation of a perceived rupture plays a major role in their subsequent thoughts and actions.

Perceived ruptures are not the only reasons for change and development to occur. Development can also occur through micro-adjustments between the person and her environment, as life unfolds. However, ruptures, which create sudden mismatch in these adjustments, appear as catalyst of processes otherwise usual. The proposed unit of analysis gives us a methodological tool to identify sequences of catalyzed change. Once this said in theoretical term, what methodological strategies enable to capture transitions?

In what follows, different methodological choices are presented and discussed. Because the main methodological challenge is to preserve the time dimension of psychological processes, I classify these examples on their basis of their relations to time. In each case, I discuss how data collection is located in relations to actual events; what externalization is treated as data; whether such data can be treated as factual information vs. reflective interpretation; and what the role of the researcher is. My analysis of the notion of transition in development underlines the particular importance of identifying ruptures perceived as such by the person. This particular point raises a specific technical issue: how to be sure that the transition under study is actually attached to a rupture perceived as such by a person? In each case, I will make a certain number of technical suggestions.

Reconstructive Approaches to Transition

The apparently simplest and most frequent way to document transitions is to describe transitions that have taken place in the past. Data are produced in the present, and attempts to capture some phenomenon that has already been the case—the phenomenon is thus reconstructed. Reconstruction is always based on forms of externalizations that have to be read in their link to some past events.

Reconstructive Interviews

One way to approach transitions in developmental trajectories is to question a person, at a certain point in time, about processes and changes that have occurred in her past. The externalization is discourse, and it is produced in the present of the research. The advantage of this technique is that it offers access to the person's present evaluation of past events which have appeared as ruptures. From point C, the person identifies events that she has personally experienced as ruptures and that are linked to A–B transition processes in her past. The weakness of this approach is that processes of change are reconstructed from the perspective of C. Consequently, it is not the richness of uncertain futures which are considered from the present, but rather the certainty from the past (Valsiner, 2008). For example, some young people experience moving town to start university studies as a rupture (Zittoun, 2006a). If they are interviewed during the transition, as they are still exploring possible

futures, options that could be, they evoke anxieties, might be self-contradictory, and express hesitations; if the transition has been experienced some time ago, their narration tends to emphasise the pathway that has been followed and the events that lead to the achieved endpoint, leaving out try-and-fail efforts leading to alternative routes—which, by being considered even if not followed, might have played an important role in the transition processes.

These reconstructions can be organized around a specific type of rupture identified either by the researcher or by the participant. For example, Mahmoud (2005) questioned Sudanese refugees in Egypt, the move to Egypt being expected to be perceived as a rupture. Other reconstructions rather offer participants to identify rupture or "turning points" (Leonard & Burns, 2006) in their life courses, and then explores these events. For my research on youth transitions, I adopted a mixed procedure: I questioned young people about a specific event likely to be experienced as rupture; yet I careful identified events *actually* experienced as such. Thus, a young woman interviewed on the (supposed) rupture of coming to university preferred to describe a major rupture she experienced earlier, the death of her grandmother (Zittoun, 2007b).

How much can such reconstructions capture the transition as they really occurred? It expects to identify on the one hand, the actual rupture-like biographical event, and on the other hand, the way in which the person has experienced it (Kohler, 1993). Yet both facts and meanings are reconstructed on the basis of memory, and as such, are mostly transformative reproductions of the past (Bartlett, 1920). To facilitate these reconstructions, externalizations made at the time of the transition might be useful. For example, to capture the way in which students dealt with the transitions due to their move to a new town, I questioned them about the objects they had taken with them and placed in their university room. As objects can be crystallization of thoughts and emotions, talking about the objects offered an indirect access to the thoughts and emotions characterizing the period at which the objects were chosen (Fuhrer, 2003; Habermas, 2001; Tisseron, 1999; Zittoun, 2006a). Similarly, when I interviewed adults about their transition to parenthood, I questioned them on their externalization during the pregnancy: the lists of first names they wrote for their children to come, the home-made simile of birth announcement cards, and so forth; on the basis of these past traces of their explorations, they could formulate some of their past thoughts and interpretations of events (Zittoun, 2003, 2005). On the other hand, the person's interpretation of the meaning of her experience is a dynamic process, likely to be reconstructed through time, and transformed every time the person thinks back about that transition, or about any related event (unless the event is traumatic, in which case the meaning of the experience might be much more fixed, for example Abraham & Torok, 1987). The more one is interested in the accuracy of the actual facts, the closer these reconstructions should probably be in time. The memory otherwise soon becomes transformed by the interpretation (which is however not a problem for the researcher interested in people's meaning making).

In such reconstructive discursive techniques, how to identify ruptures actually perceived by the person? Various verbal and non-verbal markers can signify a person's experience of an event as a rupture. Firstly, a person can explicitly label an

event as having been "eye-opening," a "radical change," a catastrophe, a shift—or any verbal expression of equivalent meaning. This is of course the simplest case: the person reflectively identifies in her experience such a shift with the mediation of a relevant semiotic mean. Second, the person might be less explicit, but might express or comment on a subjective past state which might be due to such rupture: following a specific event, she had felt depressed, lost, or anxious about the future, or in a cloudy zone... Thirdly, the person might report past actions and externalizations that might have been induced by a rupture: at this time, she had been looking for information, asking for help, seeing friends in order to discuss the situation, or alternatively, starting to use psychoactive substance. Fourth, the modalities of the discourse itself might be modified when approaching specific issues during the course of the research interview: the person's debit of discourse can become slower (as when re-experiencing) or faster, lower in tone (as when sad) or more excited, less fluid, or less structured (Zittoun, 2005, 2006a). A special attention to the modality of discourse and its flow requires a more "clinical" ear but can be developed on the basis of research on clinical interactions (Ammaniti & Stern, 1991; Green, 1973; Vermersch, 2006). Additionally, people can use para-verbal means to suggest change, such as hand gestures or bodily postures. An examination of such paraverbal or non-verbal cues might require specific technical choices (e.g., video-recording interviews).

Within such range of means to identify perceived ruptures, only the first one is associated to the research participant's clear reflective awareness of a past rupture-event, in such way that it can be expressed in a linguistic form. This reflective awareness might be due to many factors—the person might be generally self-reflective, she might have had the occasion to discuss the events with others or to symbolize them through other means than discourse (such as graphic or gestual means, Tisseron, 2000), or she might just articulate her experience as the research interview unfolds. When the person is less reflective, the researcher relies more on non verbal or paraverbal cues, and on his or her theoretical and empirical knowledge of the consequences of rupture in experience and discourse. He or she then might want to check his or her inferences with the person. For example, when a person, who usually speaks in a moderate tone, reports with great excitation the preparation of a trip, the researcher might question about the subjective importance of that trip. Of course, such an interpretative intervention usually brings the person to more reflectivity. To engage, or not, in such interpretation is a matter of the researcher's methodological and ethical choices.

Guided Reconstructive Autobiography

The problem of reconstruction of memory becomes even more accurate when people are questioned about a longer time span, such as in life-narrative interviews. Additionally to issues of memory, the very fact of turning a life experience into a narrative creates a very specific sort of data.

As experience is verbalised, it is deployed in time and thus becomes a narrative. One can construct a narrative based on events which might have appeared as disconnected

as they occurred. Also, narration enables the emergence of a fact which was not necessarily pre-existing that narration. For example, Hasse (2002, 2008) shows how adults narrate their becoming the physicists they are. They mention a series of events, randomly distributed in their childhood and their youth, which probably appeared as isolated as they occurred. From the perspective of the present, these appear as connected and part of one same "transition to being a physicist". Narration is also submission to canonical genres, of which the most elementary structure is that of an accident, being then resolved (Bruner, 1991; McAdams, 1993; Propp, 1928/1968)—narrative genres invite the narration of ruptures and transitions (Gillespie, 2005). In addition, narratives in interviews are co-constructed, and the active role of the researcher should never be underestimated in the production of a transition-like narrative. Finally, reconstructive autobiographical narrative techniques, based on language use, privilege people who have an easy access to verbal language as mode of symbolisation.

There are different technical tricks to circumvent these issues. As in most approaches in qualitative research, demultiplication of perspectives plays a key-role (Flick, 1992). One technique consists in taking seriously in account the role of the interviewer, who can become a real partner in the construction of the narrative. For example, in adult education, guided autobiography through group discussion is a common technique to identify life transitions (Dominicé, 2007; West, 2006). In a more classical research setting, an analysis of transitions in the life-trajectory of a man in his seventies was produced using the following technique: the research project and the idea of rupture were discussed at length with that person. He was firstly narrating events and memories from different periods of its life. Through further oral questioning, other memories were proposed. Then, the man was asked to produce a written account of these various events. Interpretations of these as ruptures were then discussed with him (Zittoun, 2007a). Another type of demultiplication of perspective can be obtained through techniques of collaborative research (Cornish, Zittoun, & Gillespie, 2007). In their interesting project called "Samisebe", a group of Czech sociologists of different generations wrote each their autobiography through the recent history of the country (Konopásek, 2000); they then discussed in group their perspectives on specific events, experienced by some of them as young people, by other as mature adults or already elderly people—and certain events being ruptures for some, and not for the others. Here, the collective memory confers some objectivity—or at least, some distance—to the facts; while the confrontation of perspectives brings to specify (if not polarize) personal interpretations. Finally, in autobiographical research as well, externalizations issued at the time of the experience might facilitate the experience. In a recent autobiographic text, Grass (2007) thus deplores having lost his wartime notebooks, past sketchbooks, diaries and collections of poems—having these, he believes, would give him a more trustable access to the mind of the person he once was. However, a visit to his childhood home town enabled him to revivify memories of the past.

In these examples, events considered as ruptures are identified reflectively. This identification is doubly guided. Firstly, it is always the interaction between the person and others—the researcher, the group of co-researchers, the students also engaged in a life trajectory analysis, that facilitates that process of identifying

ruptures: different perspectives, but also, perspectives exchanges between people engaged in a common project, can lead to this reflection. Indeed, these procedures are quite likely to bring participants to see their life stories from the perspectives of the other, or to apply other's analysis on their own trajectory (Gillespie, 2007). Second, such projects are also mediated by semiotic resources: people analyzing their lives are usually explicitly looking for bifurcation, critical points, ruptures, etc.—and on such case the notion of bifurcation, or rupture might become semiotic mediators guiding the attention. More generally, culturally shared modes of narrating experience might canalize a person's narration and shape it into a canonical form in which transition play an important role (Bruner, 1990; Gillespie, 2005; McAdams & Logan, 2006).

Mediated Reconstruction

To overcome the fact that narrative reconstruction privileges people who have an easy access to verbal narration, these reconstructions can be mediated by alternative modes of externalisation—based on different semiotic modes—at the time of the research process.

The mastery of language might particularly be an obstacle for children. To overcome this problem, Hviid (2002, 2008) asks children to draw a map of the places in which they live and have lived. The first mediation of their experience is thus graphic. For a while, it escapes to the convention and limitation of verbal language. Children are then asked to comment on those drawings. Verbal language completes or nuances the graphic reconstruction of the past. Thus, the first person perspective is preserved, and the complementarity of modes of externalisation (graphic, verbal) might enable to reconstruct the processes at stake.

Ruptures are then usually identified under specific forms, dependent on the semiotic codes due to different modes of externalisations. For example, when research participants are asked to draw their life trajectories, they often draw lines on which are indicated curves or sudden change of directions; in that case, these bifurcations can be questioned, and often do correspond to the participants' perception of change. Metaphors of change have thus a spatial form which might be rooted in a more embodied perception, as often metaphors have (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Real-Time Transitions

The alternative to reconstructive technique for documenting transitions is real-time data production—or at least, attempts to do so. Here, the idea is to put in place a procedure that enables to follow the process of change as it unfolds. The main options for this are longitudinal, synchronic date collection, and diachronic—repeated data collection. One of the limits of synchronic data collection is that it might be difficult to ask an observer to gather data over the extended period of time that a transition

process might last (e.g., the 9 months of a pregnancy). Researchers therefore tend to effectuate repeated data collections over a certain period (see e.g., Fogel, King, & Shanker, 2008). One of the ways to study naturally occurring transitions consists in asking research participants to repeatedly report on their transitions from their own perspective. This then raises a second issue: doing so, a person always steps out of the flow of time, and thus the procedure is not synchronic anymore. The two methodological strategies presented below take these points in account.

Real-Time Data Production—First Person

A first series of techniques is based on people's explication of their experience, as these actually unfold (or as close as this is possible). For example, one longitudinal technique is to question repeatedly the same individual over a period considered as being rich in transitions—for example the two first university years (Bell, Wieling, & Watson, 2005) or the ten years of youth (Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharpe, & Thompson, 2007). This can be also combined with the collection of various externalisations—for example, asking the subjects to describe their environment, daily activities, or current communications (Wapner & Demick, 2005, p. 297). Within our theoretical framework, which admits the importance of interactions, people's ability to confer meaning, the role of semiotic mediation in the acquisition of a reflective distance, and the constant dynamic of changes accelerated by these mediated interaction, such longitudinal research enterprise necessarily participates to the actual changes of the person. This fact can be seen as a theoretical issue (how to study "real" change?) as much as an ethical one (can a researcher influence a life-trajectory?). However, this can also be seen less as one of the constituents of the stuff about which psychological research is made—human interactions. Therefore, to be consistent with our theoretical assumptions, researchers should take this fact in account when producing and analysing data.

Accounting for the change induced by the research procedure in real-time data collection can be with different degrees. It can just be stated. It can also be deliberately used, hence turning the research procedure into a research-action or a didactic strategy. Studying the transitions that bring people to become students in a French University, Coulon (2004) asked his students to write a diary of their daily difficulties and understanding about their "métier" (profession) of students. Here, reflectivity was both seen as a research tool (to document the process) and a pedagogical tool (both to facilitate the transition taking place, and to familiarize students with ethno-methodology).

Of course, in some cases, the necessary accrued reflectivity might be seen as risking to transform too deeply the course of changes and thus the strategy has to be excluded for ethical reasons. For example, when I studied how people chose names for their children to come, I decided not to use real-time techniques. Talking to a third person, parents have to rationally account for their decision, or anticipate the reaction of the listener; yet this sort of reflective thinking differs from the logics

mostly governing naming procedures—during which people follow their intuition, listen to their dreams, or explore their fantasies. In that case, interviews might have radically altered the name-choice procedure. To support this point, it appeared that even reconstructive interviews about this procedure often brought people to see the name they choose in a very different light, and sometimes to question them (Zittoun, 2004, 2005).

In real-time data production, the researchers usually choose their subjects at moments in their lives in which they are likely to experience rupture and engage in transition processes. As in some cases of reconstructive data, events likely to provoke ruptures are identified on the basis of theoretical elaboration or exploratory work. But if researchers only examine externalizations of people during these a priori defined periods, how can they verify that these are actually engaged in transition processes due to experienced ruptures?

This has not been, as far as I know, the object of systematic considerations. However, two main techniques might be imagined and explored. On the one side, the researchers could compare externalization in these periods with other externalizations. They could be compared with each externalizations of other persons, living comparable life-events under some respect (Sato et al., 2007), so as to see if different types of discourse could be identified, and if the difference could be attributed to the fact that it follows, or not, an experienced rupture. They could also be compared with externalizations of the same person at different times of her life, to identify some qualitative changes which might be attributed to the rupture. On the other hand, some cues defined on a theoretical basis might actually indicate that the person is engaged in a process of transition. If transitions demand the emergence of new modes of thinking, to define oneself, or to define new forms of actions, such cues might be: exploratory talk; alternance of prospective and reflective talk; indications of anxiety and insecurity, etc. In order to identify these cues, the actual examination of micro-transitions might be useful, as we will show in the next section.

Archival Approaches to Transitions

To avoid issues related to added reflectivity while following events as they unfold in life-trajectories, it is possible to use longitudinal data, even when produced for other purpose than a study on transitions. Diaries might offer such longitudinal data. Diaries are produced daily by people, to testify about daily events and reflection, and are usually addressed to a real or an imagined other (Lejeune, 2000). Unlike reconstructive data, the text of diaries are externalizations following quasi in real-time (with a distance of a few hours) what people experience and how they interpret facts. Sometimes, diaries enable a reader to see how they diarists think about their past experiences, and how their interpretations of events change through time. The regularity of externalization also reveals, paradoxically, the alteration of daily life, and thus offers an excellent entry on ruptures and transitions.

On the basis of such methodological reasoning, we engaged in a research project on the ruptures experienced by a young woman during World War II in England. Data was given by her diaries produced in the frame of the Mass-Observation project, launched in England at the beginning of World War II. This project asked people to write their diaries and send them to the project leader so as for people to constitute "an anthropology of ourselves" (Bloome, Sheridan, & Street, 1993). Our analysis comprised the daily externalizations that constitute the diary, together with daily newspapers and documents to which people had access at that time. We could thus on one side identify objective events likely to be perceived as ruptures, such as the declaration of war, the first bombings, or Bevin's call inciting women to work on the "home-front". We could on the other side identify, through a close analysis of the young woman's writing, what events she might have actually perceived as ruptures, and transition processes in which she engaged (Gillespie et al., 2008; Zittoun et al., 2008).

To identify ruptures, we were attentive to several cues. Considering the written text as a form of externalization of the young woman's flow of consciousness or "stream of thought" (James, 1890), we observed its alterations. For example, during some long periods the young woman reports a few lines of short sentences in quite monotonous, repetitive way. In contrast, after some events, she writes long pages of a very dynamic discourse. Also, in these pages, there are occurrences of highly dialogical, reflective, and exploratory texts, which we have called "dialogical knots" (Gillespie et al., 2008). These were marked by numerous reports of diverse interlocutors' positions (her's in the present and in the past, other peoples), changing pronouns and verbal times, explorations of real and alternative scenarios and their consequences, etc. Over a longer period, ruptures were also appearing retrospectively, for example when the young woman observed how much her life had changed since such and such events, or when comparing her life at anniversary dates to other calendar events (Zittoun, in press-a).

Micro-processes of Transitions

If we admit changes as part of complex developmental systems, any transition processes might be decomposed into more minute transitions. Reversely, studying micro-processes of transition might highlight processes occurring not only in isolation, but also as part of wider transitions. As mentioned above, phenomenon at this scale might for example facilitate the identification of cues for wider transitions. We can here mention a few techniques for the collection of micro-processes of transition.

If the goal is to study naturally occurring transitions, one method consists in using data produced over a long period of time, to identify afterwards some events that might have been perceived as ruptures, and to engage in a close analysis of its suites. Some studies identify minute changes that happen to be part of a broader developmental dynamic (e.g., becoming a professional, language acquisition). For example, de Saint-George and Filliettaz (2008) regularly filmed young apprentices'

daily manual, physical and verbal interactions in the work place. Their close analysis of discourse and gestures follows micro-adjustment to the newness of these situations. In a different field, Nelson and her colleagues analyzed the audio recordings of a little girl's self-narration before falling asleep over a period of a few months. They could then engage in minute analysis of the micro-processes, or more brusque changes of her discourse (Nelson, 2006). Interviewing students over a period of 2 years, Bell et al. (2005) combined their analysis of the micro-transitions occurring during interviews, with their analysis of changes over the whole period. Other studies become focused on ruptures of a specific type, such as "aha" moment, "prise de conscience," or acquisition of reflectivity. Gillespie (2006) thus analyses interviews made with tourists, and focuses on moments in which the discourse reveals a change of perspective (e.g., leading them to realize that they behave as much as "tourists" than other people that they criticize) manifested by a change in the use of pronouns.

If the purpose is to understand the micro-processes of transitions, one can also provoke ruptures and see how these are resolved. Some researchers thus create experimental and quasi experimental setting in which they ask their participants to verbalize their thinking as their action unfolds. For example, Abbey and Valsiner (2004) created situations in which people were exposed to disrupting situations and had to speak aloud about how they were making sense of it. Such technique is possible only in relation to events decided in advance as potentially experienced as ruptures by the researcher.

From Micro to Transitions

The techniques just illustrated enable to render visible micro-processes of transitions. At this scale, such processes are not always accompanied by the person's sense of a rupture. However, they might lead to durable changes, either through an accumulation of micro-changes, or by "breaking through" and actually becoming cause, or part of a rupture. Also, they might play an important role in our understanding of real-life transitions. On a methodological plane, these close analyses might suggest which cues might be then used to identify ruptures and transitions in life trajectory data. On a theoretical plane, the study of micro-transitions might help to better understand what transitions are made of. Of course, when ruptures are induced by the researcher, then one has to question the possibility of generalizing what is learned from observations, especially if one admits that one of the key aspects of ruptures is their personal significance.

Combined Methods: Accounting for Complexity

Currently, difficulties attached to one or the other techniques call mostly for a combination of post-hoc and real-time data, within larger and shorter time-spans. Here, I mention two strategies based on the gathering of a plurality of data and their combination so as to account for phenomena in their systemic complexity.

Institutional Case Studies

Transitions in people's lives can occur as the settings in which they live and work are transformed. They can also be supported by institutions. Case studies of institutions thus offer rich data to analyze transitions in their sociocultural contexts. They can combine the analyses of a given setting of activity and its link with its context, of actual interactions, of key individual perspectives. Hence they can offer a frame to examine the relationship between intra-psychological changes and changes in the social world (Beach, 1999, 2003; Heath, 1996, 2004; Miles et al., 2002; Zittoun, 2004, 2006b). For example, called to document the transformation experienced by teachers and students in a professional school after the introduction of a computer-controlled production unit, Perret and Perret-Clermont (2004) combined several types of data. Analysis of archives and official documents enabled to attest for the contextual socio-historical changes; video-recordings of everyday interactions enabled to capture micro-processes in real-life, during which teachers and students had to renegotiate their respective roles and status around a new object; and interviews with them gave voice to their personal perception of the changes over a longer period.

Situated Case Studies

Similarly, case of individual changes might be apprehended more fully when a plurality of data and sources are combined. The most obvious way of elaborating a non institutional case-study is to start from a case which is already part of the public discourse and about which a plurality of data does exist. The case of the young woman writing a diary mentioned above is such a case; as her life occurred at a time of important societal events, and thanks to the fact that historical distance enables to identify significant information, we combined the first-person perspective of the diary, with the information given by other persons in their diaries during the same period (see also, Richards & Sheridan, 1987; Sheridan, Street, & Bloome, 2000), daily newspapers, scholarly researches about the period, and so forth. In his analysis of significant changes in the life of Malcolm X, Gillespie (2005) combined data given from Malcolm X's autobiography with letters from his correspondence, public discourse written by him, and other information about him.

One could also imagine combining first person reconstructive and/or quasi real-time interviews with information gathered in the significant life environment of that person—interviews of significant others (e.g., families, on the work place), observations of daily interactions, information about the setting and its implicit and explicit frame for action, etc. How this information, from different perspectives and at different levels of analysis, is then combined to give an

understanding of the whole that constitutes the transition under study, is then to be decided from case to case.

Concluding Words

This chapter proposed an exploration of available methodological strategies for the study of transitions in life trajectories. These strategies have been selected as they could respect some theoretical assumptions characterising a developmental approach, and offer solutions to certain challenges. Firstly, it is possible to approach the time-dimension of transitions, if one examines transitions as processes in the becoming, whose outcomes are not predicable in advance, but can be retraced through reconstructive techniques. Secondly, a dynamic system approach gives a good frame to show the mutual dependency of intra-psychological change, interpersonal change, and social transformation. Thirdly, the propositions made here had at their core the processes of meaning making in which a particular person is engaged. Fourthly, idiographic approaches to development enable to preserve the richness of data. The pair of notions rupture-transitions, offering a methodological unit, also might help to identify theoretically equivalent cases (Sato et al., 2007), and offer a middle-distance notion as a step towards generalisation (Zittoun, in press-b).

However, the attempt to capture a person's meaning making in transitions has brought me to raise a specific technical problem: that of identifying in the data cues signalling that the situation under study is actually attached to a rupture perceived by the person. My overall proposition is to consider data as form of externalisation produced either as the flow of events constituting transitions following perceived are happening, or as an externalisation manifesting the person's reaction as she is remembering such events. In both cases, the flow of the person's externalisation—always part of her meaning making processes—is likely to be affected by the proximity of a personally significant rupture. Externalisation can be made through different semiotic modes—verbal, gestual, graphic, etc. The researchers have then to identify how, in the particular mode they consider, the experience of rupture is manifested. Hence, the key-point is to give oneself theoretical notions and methodological techniques to identify cues of ruptures in a given semiotic mode. One the one hand, researches in other disciplines, but specialised in the modifications of semiotic modes, can be of great help: for example, clinical studies of discourse or semiotic studies of graphic representation, can provide useful indications. On the other hand, studies of micro-transitions might render visible the processes whereby dynamics of transitions are actually generated.

Once the notion of transition becomes theoretically grounded, and translated into non trivial methodological techniques, it can offer an entrance to a better understanding of dynamics of catalysed changes in life-trajectories.

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