Chapter 9
Exploring the Role of Catalyzing Agents in the Transition to Adulthood: A Longitudinal Case Study with Brazilian Youth

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Young people's transition to adulthood is one of the most critical moments in the life course, when several psychosocial transformations simultaneously pervade the relationship of the person and their cultural context. As young people develop, they start to navigate new spheres of experience that can bring significant ruptures to their sense of self-continuity (Zittoun 2011, 2012a). For instance, a sense of self-discontinuity can emerge when young people enter the world of work and start to question what they are able to do (their knowledge and skills), their position in relation to others in the new contexts as well as their identity and the meaning of their actions.

The notion of youth transitions that we are going to elaborate here comes from ideas developed in the field of *cultural psychology* (Valsiner 1997, 2007; Zittoun 2006a, b, 2007, 2012a) and *Dialogical Self Theory* (Hermans 2001; Hermans and Kempen 1995; Hermans and Hermans-Jensen 2003; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). The aim is to go beyond traditional approaches to the phenomenon of "transition" as a linear sequence of events organizing individual pathways. These approaches usually emphasize young people's movements *between* institutions and formal settings (i.e., from school to work, or from university to the labor market) or from one *social role* to another (i.e., adolescent-adult, student-worker). However, instead of privileging an outcome view of transitions, in this chapter we will advance a more systemic and dialogical perspective of youth transitions, focusing on transition *processes* (instead of outcomes) and on the occurrence of *simultaneous ruptures* in a young person's life (Camarano 2006; Sato 2006; Zittoun 2012a). We will also stress the centrality of *semiotic mediation* and the relevance of adopting *a new perspective of causality* (i.e., *catalytic causality*) in psychology in order to understand human transition experiences, and the different ways in which individuals configure their

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own "*selves*" through positioning and repositioning along the life course (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010; Valsiner 2008; Zittoun 2007, 2008, 2012a).

Although youth transitions have traditionally been associated with institutional and structural markers of development, emphasizing the sequencing of events leading to young people's entrance into the adult world (Elder 1998; Camarano, 2006), recent studies of transition phenomena focus on the *processes* rather than on *outcomes* (Carugati 2004; Valsiner 2008; Zittoun 2006a, 2012a). Developmental transitions therefore are regarded as multifaceted and mediated by the production of signs, involving *catalytic cycles of innovations*, that allows for a qualitative reorganization of human experience (Cabell 2010; Beckstead et al. 2009; Zittoun 2012a) and of the self-system (Cunha et al. 2012; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). Such a perspective highlights the processes of semiotic mediation through which both the young people and the culture they inhabit are mutually constituted.

In this chapter, we want to elaborate on a *dialogical semiotic approach to youth transitions as a process of self-regulation that occurs through catalytic cycles of innovation within a specific time frame, involving the search for integration across life spheres as well as across time, mediated by dialogical relations with significant others acting as catalyzing agents.* This chapter has three sections. The first section, "A Semiotic-Dialogical Approach to Youth Transitions" draws on the perspectives of *cultural psychology* and *dialogical self-theory* to highlight a new understanding of youth developmental transitions, focusing on the role of *catalytic cycles of innovation* and more specifically of *catalytic agents* in the production of self-regulation. "The Role of Catalyzing Agents in Youth Transitions" presents a case example that illustrates how a young woman—throughout a developmental time frame that goes from 16 to 23 years of age—negotiates significant meanings of herself and her world and performs a new relevant synthesis in her self-system. "The Dynamics of the Self-in-Motion" demonstrates and elaborates on the dynamics underlying the processes of self-regulation leading to new life trajectory.

A Semiotic-Dialogical Approach to Youth Transitions

As suggested by Valsiner (2004), *semiotic mediation* is the process that allows human beings to synthesize new meanings, both in the reflexive (i.e., through generalizations from the meaning of words) and affective domains. In this perspective, human development involves constant creation of innovation, through one's capacity to question *what is*, to imagine a possible future to be (*as if*), and to continuously project oneself in that imaginary meaning field to orient one's life trajectory (Abbey and Valsiner 2004). This movement characterizes the emergence of developmental novelty, in a dynamic tension between literal and imagined dimensions. The *self* is regarded as an autocatalytic and autoregulative system that orients the individual towards the future, while allowing for and restricting the emergence of new meanings, exerting flexible control over self-positions that the individual assumes at every moment (Valsiner 2002).

Along these lines, *semiotic mediation* can be seen as the *process of construction of meanings* that is at the core of "human" experience of the world (Abbey 2012; Valsiner 2008, 2012; Zittoun 2012a). In their relationship with the world, people are constantly creating meanings ahead of time about themselves and the world through the use of *signs* (Valsiner 2007). Therefore, meaning-making can be regarded as process through which a person internalizes *signs* that are available in the collective culture, recreating them from one's own personal experience, and then externalizing them (Zittoun 2006a, 2012a). In this process, the person creates (or develops) a *"psychological"* or *"subjective"* domain of experiencing the world that organizes person–environment relationships (Zittoun 2012b).

Developmental processes—such as youth transitions—take place through changes occurring simultaneously at multiple levels of experience. The person is situated in a particular historical and social context, constantly negotiating a set of values, beliefs, and meanings, which create certain limitations but simultaneously offer certain possibilities for one's development (Valsiner 2008). These elements circumscribe and channel opportunities as well as limits in people's life trajectories, directing them to certain paths that are possible in their particular social–historical time and setting. Elements being channelized, however, are not static, they are not just "resources" that are there to be selected, "collected" or used. They are in a permanent transformation and present themselves to the person in dynamic or agentic ways, through person–other interactions in everyday life.

A young developing person is in constant interchange with the environment, and with social others present everywhere, continuously creating and recreating mechanisms of regulation of person–other relations. Semiotic mediation is the process by which such regulation takes place. As people create new meanings—i.e., signs—to regulate their experiences in the world, they produces a personal culture that directs their developmental trajectory (Valsiner 2000). Semiotic mediation operates through emergence of novel forms—i.e., through *catalytic cycles of production of innovation* (Valsiner 2006, 2008). Recent theoretical conceptions suggest that *semiotic mediation* is a general term that encompasses several different processes that can be understood using a general scheme of systemic causality similar to the process of *catalytic synthesis*. Along these lines, semiotic mediation may take the form of a *cycle of production of innovation* much the same way as a new component is synthesized in a *chemical cycle of catalysis*. (Cabell 2010; Beckstead et al. 2009; Valsiner 2004, 2008).

Catalyzing processes facilitate the emergence of specific *signs* in the self-system that may act as *promoters* or *inhibitors* of development (Beckstead et al. 2009; Mattos and Chaves 2013; Mattos 2013; Valsiner 2008; Valsiner and Cabell 2012). The *promoting* regulatory function is particularly relevant for facing future needs and meaningful adaptation of the person to ever-new life circumstances. Signs are conceived of as promoters of generalized meanings that emerge as fields loaded with affection, and work at a higher level in relation to the flow of everyday experience facilitating the creation of meanings in anticipation to the actual experience, and preparing the person to face the unforeseeable (Valsiner 2004). Moreover, *p*romoter signs are able to act at a higher level than the ambivalent relations between personal

meanings that constitute the self-system of the person at any given time, operating changes in these relations (Valsiner 2004). However, further theoretical explorations are still needed to clarify the role of catalytic processes in the synthesis of promoter signs that may regulate youth transitions.

Much of current theoretical discussions about the role of catalysis in promoting self-regulatory processes point to a *set of conditions* or to an *atmosphere* that *indirectly* aids, supports, and enables other psychological mechanisms and functions to operate. Catalytic models may indeed be capable of showing the dynamic interactions of individuals, conditions, contexts, and catalytic agents. Yet the role of catalytic agents in this process needs more clarification.

The Role of Catalyzing Agents in Youth Transitions

A dialogical approach can be useful in clarifying the *agentic* role of social others—acting as *catalyzing agents*—who facilitate the emergence of regulatory processes capable of promoting youth transitions. The *Dialogical Self Theory* was elaborated by Hermans (2001; Salgado and Gonçalves 2007; Hermans and Hermans-Jensen 2003; Salgado and Hermans 2005; Hermans 2001, 2002) to highlight a dynamic and multivocal movement of the construction and reconstruction of meaning inside the self-system. Unlike a *unified static entity* or an *internal essence* of the subject to be *revealed* through language exchanges, the *self* maintains its unity through dialogue, and is produced as plural and polyphonic through communication interactions (Hermans 2001, 2002). Therefore, the *dialogical self* is seen as multifaceted and complex, endowed with multiple voices and different positions that coexist and hold different perspectives about the world (Hermans 2001; Salgado and Gonçalves 2007; Ribeiro and Gonçalves 2010).

The notion of the *dialogical self* suggests variability within the *self*. The *self* is social—i.e., is populated by *alterities*—and emerges through relational encounters with multiple *others* in different spheres of experience. Dialogical encounters with multiple "others" become progressively internalized in the form of I-positions. The *self* is, therefore, a "space" (or as Hermans suggests, a "landscape") composed by relations among I-positions, which are more than mere *social roles* (socially expected roles). They also refer to *reflexive meanings* and *affective states* (Hermans 2001). Therefore, a specific I-position is an emerging structure in a meaning-field of possible/alternative I-positions. The notion of the *dialogical self* emphasizes the fluidity of voices in a field of self relations (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). As a dynamic multiplicity, the self is permeated by tensions between voices that coexist and move along with changes that occur simultaneously in the diverse spheres of experience that the person navigates (Cunha et al. 2012; Cunha and Gonçalves 2009; Salgado and Gonçalves 2007; Salgado and Hermans 2005).

An interesting approach has been put forth by Zittoun (2006a, 2007, 2012a) in the recent years. The author suggests that a developing individual, actively participates in one's own process of development, selecting and using *symbolic resources*, by

appropriating *signs* that are available in the collective culture, as well as recreating them from personal experience. *Transition* processes are triggered by *ruptures* or discontinuities that occur when people face situations that question what they take for granted, their existing operating meaning-fields or *semiotic sets* (Zittoun et al. 2012). Therefore, as argued by Zittoun, a semiotic dynamic is created to help the person overcome ruptures and reduce uncertainty when one negotiates, modifies, and transforms cultural and shared meanings in a personal way, creating new semiotic sets which organize and (re)structure one's personal culture. However, although Zittoun and colleagues advance important concepts related to youth transitions, their emphasis rely on young people's *selection* and *use* of symbolic resources and youth participation in different spheres of experience, but do not explicitly reveal the dynamics of self-regulation over time and the role of catalyzing agents in this process.

Along these lines, we want to propose here, the idea that social others are equally relevant in youth transition processes, not only because they function as "resources" but also because they may operate as *catalyzing agents* for self-transformation. Our idea is that in contemporary urban cities, as young developing people increasingly become participants in diversified spheres of experience (i.e., family, school, work, religious groups, and eventually youth collective groups), their interactions with social others substantially increase, and may contribute to an intensification of their sharing of specific activities and cultural values, beliefs and meanings. Therefore, *significant others may temporarily act as direct catalyzing agents in transition processes—facilitating new synthesis in youths' self-configurations*. Under these circumstances, significant others have a dynamic role and can be regarded as *temporary embodiments of the catalytic function* that *take on the catalytic function and enable a specific direction for change*. They do not merely act as "resources" for youth transitions, they actively "catalyze" such transitions.

In this chapter, we expect to contribute to the current theoretical discussions about youth transitions specifically by exploring the role of *catalyzing agents* in this process. Although semiotic catalysis can be generally regarded as a *set of conditions* or an *atmosphere* that *indirectly* aids, supports, and enables other psychological mechanisms and functions to operate (Cabell 2011), I will advance the idea that *significant others may temporarily act as direct catalyzing agents in the life of youth—facilitating the emergence of promoter signs capable of operating a new synthesis in their self-configurations*. By acting as *temporary embodiments of the catalytic function, significant others may enable a specific direction for change*. As catalytic processes come into play, catalytic agents may facilitate the emergence of *promoter signs*, and may anticipate the *result* of their regulatory functions in the self-system by "showing" this desired result in advance to the young person, before it actually occurs. The person, then, is able to foresee what one might become in the future, anticipating one's own "jump" from past to future in the present moment. In this movement, an individual regulates one's own development by building promoter signs that may operate as meaning bridges between past and future experiences, projecting oneself into the future, and orienting further actions towards change and reconfiguration.

Therefore, we believe that the processes supported by catalyzing agents may foster the building of *as-if* I-positions or alternative I-positions that orient the young person's actions towards the future. The role of catalyzing agents facilitates the emergence of promoter signs that provide an integration of personal culture *between different spheres of experience* and *between past and future dimensions of experience.* Such a conception may contribute to a dynamic understanding of youth transition processes, helping to uncover the dynamics of the self-in-motion, the emergence of the developing subject, integrating simultaneously diachronic as well as synchronic self-perspectives.

The Dynamics of the Self-in-Motion

Following this line of reasoning, we suggest that youth transitions involve the dynamics of the self-in-motion, a process of self-positioning and repositioning in which people seek to overcome emerging ruptures as they participate in increasingly diverse spheres of life presented by their social and historical context. Ruptures bring tensions between I-positions and involve reconfigurations in the self-system. Therefore, youth transitions imply a movement of searching for self-continuity after changes. It involves *scaffolding* within the dialogical self. *Scaffolding* is a specific form of guidance that leads to *semiotic regulation* and *temporal reorganization* of the self-system. In youth transitions significant others may act as catalyzing agents that introduce multivocality and help increase dialogicality in the self-system. *Dialogical encounters with significant others located in diverse spheres of life become progressively internalized, guiding as well as legitimizing the emergence of promoter signs that orient youth developmental movement in a certain direction.*

The whole process may be seen through the lens of catalytic cycles where innovations are synthesized. Catalyzing processes create emerging differentiation (Cabell 2010) at bifurcation points in the developmental trajectory. Through catalyzing processes, specific *signs* can emerge in the landscape of the self and may act as *promoters* or *inhibitors* of development (Valsiner and Cabell 2012; Mattos and Chaves 2013; Mattos and Chaves, in press). As we have developed elsewhere, when a young person faces discontinuity in one's self-system, promoter signs will allow to distance oneself from the here-and-now experience, and build meaning-bridges between past and future, and/or between different spheres of experience, promoting self-continuity across time and space (Mattos and Chaves 2013; Mattos and Chaves, in press).

Dynamic transformations occurring after young people face ruptures in their self-system imply (re)configurations of relations between I-positions. After a young person faces a rupture, (for example, when one enters the world of work), dominant I-positions may not respond to the changes emerging in one's spheres of experience and new positions and meanings have to be created to face new situations. In extreme ambivalent situations, for instance, inhibitor signs may emerge and block further catalytic synthesis, bringing rigidity to the self-system (Mattos and Chaves 2013).

In this chapter, we will focus on a case study, mapping the *emerging tensions between I-positions* and *showing how these tensions evolve over time*, because we believe that an ideographic view is the best methodological approach to reveal the dialogical tensions and the dynamics of the self-in-motion as well as *scaffolding* within the dialogical self. We suggest that young people's positionings and repositionings are activated through *external* as well as *internal* (self-reflective) *scaffolding*, and that the role of catalyzing agents is crucial in these processes fostering the emergence of new I-positions—or better—of *promoter self-positions*. Our aim is to show how self-regulation processes are activated and contribute to the emergence of novelty and to the shaping of alternative developmental trajectories. We seek to elaborate on how young people are constructing and negotiating their *self-in-motion*, transforming their *self-configurations* while shaping their future, making the mechanisms through which catalytic cycles of production of meaning take place explicit, and highlighting the role played by catalyzing agents in this process.

Case Example

The study presented here was designed as a longitudinal qualitative study of multiple cases (Stake 2006). It was structured in three rounds of in-depth interviews with six afro-descendant youths who participated in a youth apprenticeship program developed by an NGO (nongovernmental organization) in the city of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. During the first round of data collection, the youths were 18–19 years old; in the second round they were 20–21, and in the third round, 22–23. We will report the case of Jane and focus on her experiences between 15 and 23 years of age. Interviews took place at the NGO headquarters and lasted about two hours. Data were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. Main themes explored during the interviews were: significant changes and challenges experienced, work experience and family relations, and educational experiences. At the end of each interview the participant completed an activity of timeline construction. Other forms of data collection involved the follow up of updates in Jane's profile on the social website, *Orkut* (created and managed by Google) for about eight months between the second and the third interview.

The present analysis focuses primarily on youth relations in the dimensions of family and work—because these are significant spheres of experience established by literature among Brazilian youth at this age range (Dayrell 2010; Sarti 2004). The case exemplifies *the dialogical semiotic approach to youth transitions*, emphasizing the dynamics of the *self-in-motion*, i.e., *self-configuration* and *reconfiguration* over time, exploring the person's negotiations of new self-positions among different spheres of experience and across time, highlighting the role of significant others (e.g., Jane's coworker and supervisor Helena, and Jane's grandmother) as catalyzing agents of changes in Jane's system of values and identity. Following the presentation of the case, we will articulate the analysis with theoretical perspectives.

Jane

Jane is an afro-descendant young woman who lives with her parents and sister in a poor neighborhood in the city. Her father is an auto mechanic and her mother is a housekeeper. In the following presentation we will highlight the role of two significant others (her work supervisor Helena, and her grandmother), acting as catalyzing agents of transformations in Jane's self-system

First Interview: "I won't be able to do it all". In the first interview, Jane told us about the ruptures her family was going through after her father was severely injured in a work accident and had to stop working for a while. During this time her family went through a lot of financial hardship, because her father stopped earning and could not get a pension from the government. Jane was 16 years old when she searched for a way to contribute to support her family. She sought the apprentice program at an NGO, and started working at the library of a private university. She thought this was a turning point in her life, because the survival of her family depended almost exclusively on her earnings and on the help provided by her grandmother (who owned the house in which they were living).

When she started to work, she felt "people [coworkers] made a 'distinction' because [she] was an apprentice. They didn't treat [her] as a real employee at the company". When someone from outside asked who she was, her supervisor always said that she was a "young apprentice." She did not like the way she was treated, which made her feel uneasy and uncomfortable. However, soon Jane met Helena, who worked for the human resources department of the university and built a strong mentor-like relationship with her. Helena was frequently contacted by Jane to help solve problems and clarify doubts. Jane explained that Helena "trusted [her] more then she trusted her own self," as Helena always encouraged Jane to perform new tasks and try new things. However, in spite of Helena's support, Jane regarded herself as insecure and overly worried about everything. But Helena repeatedly tried to remind Jane of her capacity to accomplish new things. With the passage of time, Jane started to feel more confident and began to "value things [she] was doing," and learned "to commit" to what she was doing. When her contract as an apprentice expired (at the age of 18), she was hired by the university to work at the administration office. She said that she "learned what responsibility means," and explained that she understood responsibility as the capacity "to commit to something that [she was] doing, to know that what [she was] doing was something important, something that was making [her] grow, that will influence [her] future."

With her transition to the world of work, Jane could now "help [her family] with everything," particularly paying for their expenses, providing needed financial support. She formally became her family's main provider, as she "was the only person at home with regular earnings." During her first year of work, however, Jane used to give all the money she earned (around US\$ 200 per month) to her mother. Jane said she did so because her mother "knew better what to do with it," and she could manage the money better than Jane herself.

Regarding her dreams for the future, Jane remained dependent on the significant other's perspectives, dreaming her mother's dreams. She told us that she wanted "to fulfill [her] mother's dream to have a house of her own". As her family was living in a house lent by her grandmother, Jane wanted to earn money to buy a house for her mother.

Second Interview: "I can't think much about the future, I can only think about now." When Jane was 21, she told us about another relevant change in her life, her transition to a new job function: working at the university's administration office. As Jane started to perform more complex tasks, she took on more responsibilities. Progressively, she gained more self-confidence and became "one of the people with more responsibilities in her work department". She said she was feeling more competent and started to "know [she] was doing a good job," and became better adapted to work. She recognized that Helena had played a big part in her transformation, but at the time of this second interview, Helena had left the company, and Jane was working under the supervision of Joana, who also acted as mentor, encouraging Jane and giving her support in her job activities. But, Jane said she had become more independent of adult influence, "acted with more freedom," and started to "do things by [her]self," not relying so much on "adult's advice and opinion." She stopped doing what "adults told her to do." She said that her situation at work had reversed, because she had started to give advice to her less experienced colleagues. She became a sort of mentor to them, much the same way Helena had been to her. Jane told us that "people began looking for [her] help to solve their problems," and she started to feel *"not only responsible for herself but also for others."*

Although Jane's life changes at this time were marked by *gaining more responsibility at work*, the *kind of responsibility* she was taking at the job did not immediately transfer to the family sphere. In her family life, Jane felt "desperate and swamped in financial debts". By the time of Jane's 20th birthday, another significant rupture happened in her family—her mother got very sick, and Jane had to manage her family money and home expenses –tasks her mother used to do. This process, however, was very complicated because Jane's family was again relying almost exclusively on her earnings to survive. Her father could not work but wasn't receiving a government pension. Jane began to have money problems, and accrued debts from her credit cards. She said she "had to manage everything in [her] life, and this was a lot of work", demanding a lot of effort. As money debts started to pop up, she felt it was a "big challenge" to live on her earnings.

During this difficult time, Jane started to grow closer to her grandmother, a powerful woman that seemed be the central figure in the family life. Her grandmother was a "mother-in-saint,"[1] a priestess of the Brazilian African-oriented religion called *Candomblé*. Jane started to visit her grandmother's temple often and to take part

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[1] A "mother-in-saint" is a priestess of the Brazilian Afro religion, "Candomblé." The word comes from the title "Ialorixá" in African language, where "Iyá" means mother and "Orixá" means a deity or ancestral spirit. The *mother-in-saint* run temples are where several rituals and cult practices take place throughout the year (Matory, 2005).

in the religious rituals. She told us she was being "initiated" into the religion by her grandmother, learning religious principles and values, and performing tasks in the preparation of rituals, such as cooking and cleaning the temple. She regarded this proximity to the *Candomblé* religion as "something [she] inherited from [her] grandmother." She also revealed that, some time ago, she started to have dreams and forebodings that she "didn't know the meaning," of. Then, her grandmother told Jane that, according to the assumptions of their religion, these dreams could be seen as a "calling from the Saint", implying that one of the divinities of *Candomblé* wanted to be praised and honored by Jane, and that she had "inherited" this "task" from her grandmother, who used to do the same.

As Jane explained, it was necessary for her to be initiated by her grandmother in the *Candomblé* religion in order to understand what was happening to herself and to praise the saints according to the rituals. Jane pointed out that her grandmother "already knew [Jane] had inherited this [task] from her," because "it was a family thing." But in the past, her grandmother had not wanted any family member to get involved with the religion, because she said it "demands a lot of responsibility." As an initiate, Jane would have "to take responsibility not only for herself but also for others," as her grandmother herself had.

Jane explained that her incursions into *Candomblé* caused some conflicts with her mother, who did not want Jane to "take on that kind of responsibility." However, Jane talked to her father, and he said he had nothing against her participation. Jane's father told her: "Do you really want this? If you want it, you can go." Then she decided: "I want it, then I'll go." And since then, her mother was increasingly accepting of the idea of her involvement with *Candomblé*.

Regarding her relationship with the educational sphere of experience, Jane finished high school and tried to enter the university. She took the exams to get accepted into a public university three times (each time, for a different course: psychology, library, and communication), but failed. She reported that she "didn't feel prepared," because she "couldn't think much about the future, [she] could only think about the [here-and-] now." Working was her priority.

Third Interview: "I can take charge of my own life now". At the third interview, Jane had just turned 22 years old. She said that a significant change in her life this time was the fact that she *"became more responsible,"* and had "learned to organize [her] finances." She was dealing with her finances more competently: she paid off all her debts, cut up her credit cards, and paid for everything in cash. She started to account for her expenses, taking notes on everything she was paying for, and to limit her expenses, buying only what she really needed. She learned to control herself, and began "to do everything the right way."

Talking about other changes in her life, she also said she had become more able to control her impulsivity towards others. She learned to deal better with other people, to listen to what they had to say. She had learned to let go when people said things that she did not like to hear. Sometime earlier, she had been aggressive and explosive, giving unreflective responses to other people's commentaries, as if she could not

control what she was going to say. But now she was calmer and "didn't want to enter in a dispute with others for small things." She gained more control over attitudes and behavior.

These changes significantly affected Jane's relationship with her mother. She thought they could deal better with each others' differences, as her mother became better able to acknowledge Jane's "own space," to understand that she had to "have a space for [her]self." Jane reflected that, some time before, her mother always wanted Jane to agree with her opinions. But now, her mother became more able to listen to and respect Jane's thoughts and opinions. They were in less disagreement with each other, because Jane was better able to let go when her mother wanted to take a stand or to argue with her. And, as Jane did not want to get in disputes for small things any more, she could "let [her] mother discover for [herself] what might be right or wrong" (thus, Jane talked here in a reverse position—as-if referring to a child).

She said she was now taking care of her mother's money. She had opened a sort of a savings account for her mother, and every month she deposited some amount of money in this account, and gave her mother some more to spend on herself. Therefore, regarding management of family money, their positions had reversed. Reflecting on the advantages of saving money, Jane said she thought "some people make plans to buy something with that money"—projecting herself into the future—"because some people are not able to save money, and spend their money as soon as they need something"—as she used to do in the past. And she thought this could be a good way for her mother to save the money to make home improvements she had wanted for a very long time.

Jane said she felt like an adult at the time of this interview, because she could "assume her life for [her]self," she could "say what [she] wants, what [she] can and cannot do" because she was "responsible for [her]self". Jane reflected that this was a "difficult [task] to achieve" because there were several people that influenced her life—such as her mother—and who used to tell her what to do, and she usually accepted whatever was told, but now she felt "liberated." She could act based on her own decisions, and if something went wrong, she could "take the responsibility for her mistakes." Therefore, Jane thought she could "take charge of [her] own life," as she was "not only responsible for [her]self, but also for others." Talking about what she considered an adult to be, Jane reflected that being an adult involved "taking responsibility for others, helping others," and feeling that "not only does your own life depend on you, but other people's lives can also depend on you."

During the third interview, Jane also reported changes in her educational experience. She passed a very difficult exam to enter a public university and will study pedagogy (education). She said she had "felt prepared [for the exam]" because this time she had studied more. Now she can make plans for her future, and wants to continue studying and working at the same company for some time. She will arrange her work shift at the company in order to fit her university schedule, as she had gained more stability in her job. She said she now felt that she has "plans for [her own] life, only for [herself]" and that she wanted "to have a place of [her] own." She told us that now she could dream about the future and she was "seeking to be happy" (see Table 9.1).

Table 9.1 Synthesis of emerging ruptures and tensions between I-positions in Jane's self-system

Emerging ruptures	Spheres of experience	Main tensions between I-positions and overcoming strategies	Description
1st interview: father's work accident and beginning to work	Work	Apprentice X, unskilled-youth (mutual in-feeding)	Conflicting discourses: accepting youth apprentices X disqualifying them
	Family	Dependent-daughter X provider	Ambivalence between: being taken care of by parents and supported by them and X becoming the only household provider
2nd interview: escalation of ruptures, changing job functions; mother's sickness; appearance of debts; academic under-achievement; embodied symptoms	Work	Responsible worker (I-competent) X, irresponsible money manager (I-incompetent/I-in-debt), emerging promoter sign: "Initiated" (capable of weaving a sense of responsibility across different spheres of experience)	Dialogical encounters with Helena are initially circumvented by Jane's lack of trust in herself. Progressive internalization of Helena's voice (I-as-responsible-employee). Tensions emerge in the family as Jane's mother gets sick. Jane has to assume financial control of home expenses, but debts with credit cards start to appear and she feels desperate and swamped. Emergence of a promoter sign ("initiated") in the sphere of religion (Candomblé) which begins an integration of different spheres (I-Initiated)
3rd interview: religious engagement; changes in relationship with mother; passed public university exams; job stability	Family Religion Integration across different spheres of experience, religion + family + education + work	A meta-position: initiated (in Candomblé); integrates: responsible worker + responsible student + responsible money manager/provider + I-responsible (person)	The meta-position I-initiated acts a promoter sign, knitting a "sense of responsibility" across time (past–future) and space (different spheres of experience), guiding Jane's actions and decisions in the direction of future goals. Jane gains more stability at work, studies and passes the public university exam. Her relationship with her mother changes—she has more autonomy regarding her mother's opinions and takes care of her mother's money (reverse positions)

Analysis

Jane's trajectory shows how self-regulation emerges in a process of dialogical *scaffolding* among different spheres of experience, leading not only to positioning and repositionings within the self-system but also to transformations in meanings and value's system—and more specifically in the meaning of *responsibility as a central value in Jane's self-system*. Her case highlights the dialogical tensions and the dynamic movements of the self-in-motion, across time and among different spheres of Jane's life. It shows how *external* and *internal scaffolding* are build upon dialogical exchanges with significant others present in central spheres of experience, acting as catalyzing agents of change.

The first interview (that took place when Jane was 18 years old) captured *self* dynamics when there was a significant rupture in Jane's life as a result of her father's work accident. Family life was at that time the *central sphere* of Jane's life experience, around which her self-system was organized. As her family experienced that rupture and faced financial hardship, Jane and her family were put in a situation of great *vulnerability*, and she sought the apprentice program as a way of helping support herself and her family. Jane's dominant I-position—*dependent daughter*—emerges out of her dialogical exchanges in her family, especially with her mother. This I-position creates a meaning-field that reflects how Jane experienced the family as a sphere of close proximity and bonds among people, where everyone cares for others and worries about others' wellbeing. In this sense, the *dependent daughter* I-position voices how Jane counted on her family for help and support in times of need, and that parents should act as supporters of children's needs as well as the reverse, children should support their parents in times of necessity. It also reflects a value system of an adolescent/young woman conforming to the opinions and orientations of her parents. Her *mother* and *grandmother* are dominant figures in her family life as well as in her personal life. In Jane's nuclear family, her *mother* is the one who guides the opinions and actions of her father, her sister, as well as herself. As Jane explains:

> My mother's decisions are those of my father as well. She is the one who has the final word. If she says something, my father always goes with her [opinion]. He works and is the [family] provider, he does everything, but the salary is hers [to spend]. Therefore if she says 'go,' everybody has to go with her. [. . .] If she has a thought, she expects [me and my sister] to conform to this thought.

In the broader family—and even among members of the broader community—it is her *grandmother* (her father's mother) who is the central figure, who holds the family together and mediates conflicts among family members, as everybody remains in close proximity to her and to her activities as a *mother-in-saint*, the priestess of *Candomblé*. Every weekend the whole family gets together at her grandmother's place, and if there is a conflict among family members, it is always her grandmother who is called upon to solve the dispute.

Therefore, at the initial phase of our investigation, Jane's interest and worries are significantly influenced by—and even tied to—the needs and interests of her family, as she also makes clear when she says that *her dreams are the dreams of her mother*, implying that she could not have dreams of her own.

Emerging Tensions in the Work Sphere and Their Overcoming

As Jane enters the world of work, new tensions emerge in her self-system. She is confronted by opposing discourses prevailing there. She recalls the voice of the librarian (her supervisor), who identifies Jane as a "young apprentice", and makes her feel uncomfortable or even excluded from the "scene" of her work environment. The librarian seems to voice dominant discourses about young people in the Brazilian collective work culture: the *discourse of disqualification of* "youth." Through this discourse, youth are regarded as less experienced and somehow incapable or lacking the necessary abilities to fit in the work environment or perform required complex tasks and responsibilities. Therefore, Jane feels challenged and devalued as "young" and "different" from older, more experienced colleagues.

Jane's initial experience in the work sphere also reveals tensions between *acceptance*—prevailing in her family sphere—and *rejection*—that she faces as a new apprentice confronted with a context where everybody else's job function is already determined and structured. The opposing I-positions that emerge out of these dialogical encounters with others in the workplace are: *Apprentice X unskilled(devalued)-youth*. The ambivalences between these self-positions reflect Jane's struggle to fit it, to find a place in the work environment and to be recognized and accepted there. But the emerging feelings of "disqualification" (resulting from the combination of *unskilled* and *devalued*), of incompetence, and insecurity find echo and are amplified by the state of vulnerability of her family, and seem to take over and dominate the landscape of positions in her self-system.

Dealing with these ambivalences, Jane developed a strong mentor-like relationship with Helena, who brought an *alternative voice* to the landscape of her self-system, a voice of *confidence*, of *trust* in Jane's *competence* to perform successfully at work. However, in the beginning, this alternative voice was always circumvented by Jane's feeling of incompetence and insecurity, in a *mutual-in-feeding* strategy (Valsiner 2002). Every time Helena highlighted her trust in Jane's competence, Jane reaffirmed her feeling of incompetence and inability, as if resisting change and trying to maintain the dominant negative view of herself.

In time, however, Jane started to internalize Helena's voice in her self-system, and a new *promoter position* (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010) emerges in the work sphere—the Responsible-Worker. Jane was capable of distancing herself from the stream of contradictory discourses and experiences. She acknowledged her own ability to perform new functions and to take on new work *responsibilities*, recognizing the difference between the way she used to be in the past and the new way she started to become. Slowly, Jane developed a sense of belonging to the work environment, and put into a new perspective the conflict between her old negative voice and Helena's more positive alternative voice. Therefore, the new a *promoter position* of *responsible worker* emerges through dialogical encounters and recognition of a *significant other* present in her workplace, and through internalization of external voices, especially Helena's. Using her relational resources, Jane began to build bridges with the alternative voice, by expanding self-meanings expressed by positions such as I-confident, I-competent, and I-trustful.

Yet a decisive turning point was the recognition she gained through her dialogical encounters with Helena—who trusted her, and demonstrated more confidence in Jane than she could have for herself. Helena's *anticipated recognition* of Jane's qualities provided the *catalytic condition* Jane needed to start reconfiguring herself as someone capable of performing new job functions successfully. Only after Helena's recognition—and more specifically, *only after being* "imaginatively" *put by Helena into a more powerful position*—could Jane position her own self that way. She could voice these meanings for herself and feel empowered. Reflecting on these transformations, Jane told us she learned to be more confident, but "still [felt] a little insecure, sometimes," indicating that the new emerging position as *responsible worker* was not yet fully consolidated.

In the family sphere, however, Jane was still operating mostly from the position of *dependent daughter*. Although a new position was emerging in her family sphere as well—the position of *provider*—this new I-position remained *latent*. Jane recognized that she was the "only person contributing to her family expenses", but contradictorily she gave all the money to her mother to manage, because she regarded her mother was more capable of doing that then she herself was. Therefore, the *provider* position seemed *dissociated* from the stream of Jane's experience within her family, remaining as a *latent* or *hidden* I-position, subsumed in a self-system where the *dependent daughter* was dominant.

Jane'*s* decisions regarding her future were postponed or suspended by her shared living experience, where the present was the best possible choice, due to the constraints existing in her immediate context. In this constraining environment, Jane was mostly caught in the here-and-now meaning field of life experience, and could not project herself much into the future.

Growing Tensions between Relevant Self-Positions

Promoter positions, however, do not immediately transfer or expand across different spheres of experience. In the second interview, Jane's promoter position as *responsible worker* seemed much more consolidated, helping to promote her healthy adaptation to the work environment. Jane expressed her satisfaction with her accomplishments on the job, changing functions and gaining progressively more recognition as well as *responsibilities* from superiors. She proudly said she was "one of the persons with more responsibilities in her sector." She still had a mentor-like relationship with her new supervisor Joana, but she felt more confident and secure, and could solve work problems by herself, without relying so much on support from others.

However, new ruptures and tensions emerged in Jane's family life. Once more, her father stopped receiving his pension covering his injury, and her mother fell ill. Therefore, Jane had to assume the management of her family's money, a task usually performed by her mother. The latent *provider* position was forced into the foreground of her self-system by the reversal of roles with her mother. Then, there was

a significant dispute between two powerful opposing positions to dominate the family sphere: *dependent daughter* X *provider*, one reflecting her old *self* configuration and the other, a new alternative position.

At this time, however, debts with credit cards started to appear, and Jane felt desperate and swamped. The new *responsibilities* she held at work did not seem to transfer to her family life. Jane felt that "it took too much work to manage her life". By using the word "work" to refer to the ambivalences emerging in the family sphere, Jane was possibly trying to integrate within the psychological space two significant spheres of her life experience (work and family). She might be *trying to find a sign to mediate or to integrate her work experience* (now characterized by *responsibility* and the ability to perform) *and her family experience* (characterized by her *irresponsible* use of credit cards and inability to manage financial expenses). However, as she could not yet find a meaning bridge to integrate these two spheres, and as they seem to remain dissociated from each other, the tension grew and found expression through *body symptoms*, such as hives (*urticaria*), and *foreboding dreams* that made her feel terrified.

Therefore, although Jane gained significant foothold in the workplace, there was a growing tension between different spheres of her life experience. Despite the new-found prominence of her work life, the central sphere continued to be her family, and ambivalences between I-positions that dominate the two spheres became more relevant. Specifically, there was a growing tension between the *responsible worker* position—which dominates the landscape in the work sphere—and the *irresponsible money manager* position—that begins to dominate family life. With ambivalence growing out of different spheres of her life experience, Jane tried a *new meaning loop* as a way to reach for self continuity.

Enabling Integration between Different Spheres of Experience

By the time she began experiencing these ambivalences between *responsible worker* X *irresponsible money manager*, Jane also developed a very close bond to her grandmother. Jane's grandmother was a *"mother-of-saint"*, and Jane started to visit her temple more often, participating in some of the rituals taking place there. When she talked about her grandmother, Jane emphasized that she "helped and took care of a lot of people, not only the members of her family, but also any people that sought her help." She said she very much admired her grandmother's commitment to helping others. However, as Jane explained, her grandmother had never wanted—until that moment—the direct involvement of her relatives in *Candomblé*, because this religion required the person "to take on many responsibilities", and "it was not something you could enter and leave when you want." Jane's explanations seemed to imply that, in order to become a member of *Candomblé*, a person had to fully commit to *long-term spiritual responsibilities* (especially the responsibility to *help others*).

But the grandmother's attitude towards Jane herself was different, because Jane was being "initiated" to become a member in her temple. The grandmother told

Jane that she had "inherited" some of her qualities as a religious woman. When she learned about Jane's symptoms—especially about her *foreboding dreams*, of which Jane herself did not know the meaning, the grandmother told Jane that they were due to a "calling from the Saint." In the religious tradition of *Candomblé*, when one of the divinities "calls" a person, it means that she is supposed to praise the divinity by adhering to the religious practices. The fact that the Saints were calling Jane, then, implied that she had to be "initiated" into the religion in order to start making offerings to the Saint and performing related rituals as a way to respond to that "calling." Interpreted by her grandmother, the "calling from the Saint" had a powerful effect on Jane, who felt compelled to be "initiated" and to start taking on some of the *responsibilities* associated with *Candomblé*—to take responsibility for the *spiritual wellbeing* of others—even against her mother's wishes.

From a *dialogical-semiotic approach to the self*, it is possible to understand the intricate interplay among Jane's I-positions that emerge by these exchanges. To overcome *ambivalences between different spheres of experience*, Jane tries *a new meaning loop*. She gets closer to a powerful significant other: her grandmother—the central figure in her primary sphere of experience (i.e., family life). Her grandmother then took the role of a catalytic agent for change. It is by the *anticipated recognition* and *acknowledgement* coming from her grandmother—who interprets her symptoms, and gives meaning to something that Jane *herself* does not know the meaning—that a *new promoter position* can emerge and come to the foreground of Jane's self-system, beginning to *integrate* different spheres of Jane's life. The grandmother's proximity and her interpretation of the meaning of Jane's symptoms function as a condition for new transformations in Jane's self-system. Much in the same way that Helena had done in the work sphere, Jane's grandmother *recognized* Jane's potential to *become* someone in the future that at that moment she was not yet, guiding the emergence of a new *promoter position* in Jane*'s* self-system.

The *promoter position* as *initiated* emerges in these dialogical relations, and knits together the positions of *responsible worker* and *provider*, by giving a new *amplified* meaning to the "*responsibilities*" Jane has to assume in the different spheres of her life. The position *initiated* carries a sense of *spiritual responsibility* that emerges as a powerful way to interweave different senses of responsibility across Jane's life. On the one hand, Jane could redefine the sense of *personal responsibility* she has built in the work sphere*,* through dialogical exchanges with Helena, and that made Jane capable of assuming new work functions, and even to start helping co-workers with their tasks. On the other hand, she could also redefine her *interpersonal responsibilities* in the family sphere and become responsible "not only for herself, but also for others," that is, for her parents and for her sister, by becoming more organized with expenses, reversing roles, and assuming responsibilities that originally belonged to her mother, and even taking care of her mother's money by creating a savings account for her.

Therefore, what happened through this *new meaning loop* was the development of her capacity of self-regulation by the emergence of a *promoter sign* that functioned as a *meaning bridge* across different spheres of experience. After the emergence of a powerful *promoter position* that emerges in the *religious sphere* of experience,
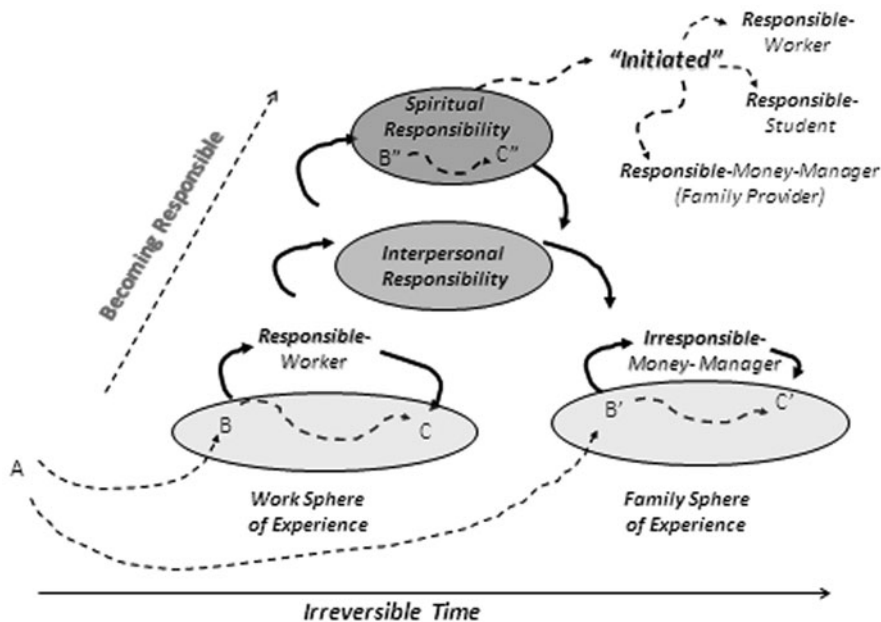
Fig. 9.1 The growth of self-regulation through hierarchical use of signs

previous *limited* senses of *responsibility expanded* to a broad—*spiritual*—meaning of responsibility. This *new hypergeneralized sense of responsibility* was capable of bringing continuity to Jane's self-system across space (diverse spheres of experience) and across time (past-present-future).

As illustrated by Fig. 9.1, Jane's initial self version (A) enters the work sphere and starts a dialogical relation with Helena (B), who recognized Jane's competence in successfully performing her work tasks in advance (even before Jane could recognise that herself). Jane began to internalize Helena's voice, and developed a *promoter position* as *responsible worker* (C). After some time, confronting her mother's sickness in the family sphere, and through dialogical relations with her sick mother (B'), Jane positioned herself as *irresponsible money manager* (C'). The two positions of *responsible worker* and *irresponsible money manager* were powerful signs that dominated the landscape of dialogical relations in the main spheres of Jane's life—family and work. However, there was a growing tension between these two dominant positions, because they referred to contradictory forms of dealing with *responsibility (i.e., contradictory semiotic sets)*.

Seeking to overcome ambivalence, Jane reached for a new meaning loop by increasing her participation in the religious sphere and getting closer to the powerful figure of her grandmother (B''), who offered *an anticipated view of* Jane *in the future*—by projecting her into *something that she not yet was*, *but could become*—because she has *inherited* the spiritual qualities of her grandmother. Then, dialogical

relations with the grandmother lead to the development of another *promoter position—initiated* (C"), characterized by an amplified or expanded perspective on responsibility: *spiritual responsibility*. This new *promoter position* acted as a powerful self-regulatory sign that *integrated* different spheres of Jane's life (work, family, religion), and provided *continuity* across time (past–present–future), since it emerged as a sort of "inherited" quality passed through generations.

Reconfiguration of the Self-System Across Space and Time

The *meaning loop* taking place across different *spheres* and *levels* of experience brought Jane's self-system to a reconfiguration in time and space The intervention of the powerful *promoter position initiated*—emerging in the religious sphere—was able to knit together partial and/or limited meanings of *responsibility* that emerged in specific spheres of Jane's life, providing a continuity of self across different contexts. Jane was able to put all kinds of limited responsibilities into perspective and expanded her responsibility into different life domains (i.e., work, family, education, and religion).

A new sense of religious responsibility and engagement came together with changes in Jane's relationship with her mother, and brought changes in her academic life as well, as she studied and passed a very difficult exam to study at a public university. In her job, she also gained more stability, expanding and consolidating her previous job functions. At the work sphere, Jane had internalized the voices of competence, confidence and organization (expressed initially by Helena), and felt responsible not only for herself but also for coworkers. She acted as a mentor, an adviser, to her colleagues. Jane revealed that she no longer relied so much on the approval of others to make decisions. She felt free of other people's influence, and believed she was "able to take charge of [her] own life."

At home, she has taken on responsibility and acted effectively to manage the money that she earned at work. She has paid off all her debts and cut up all her credit cards. She paid cash for her expenses, and gave a little money to her mother every month. There was sort of a reverse in positions, because Jane was able to take care of herself and of others as well, consolidating and expanding *interpersonal responsibility* into the family sphere (which she had already accomplished in the work life). Her relationship with her mother also changed, because her mother has begun to listen to and respect her daughter's opinions.

This movement demonstrates that Jane was creating new meanings for herself. By the time of the third interview, when she was 23 years old, she had reconfigured her self-system after the *meaning-loops* bridging different spheres of experience. She had forged a new identity, negotiated among several I-positions in the landscape of multiple voices. The voice that emerged as dominant was *responsible*, expressing an integrated and integrative perspective of herself, irradiating its influence to different dimensions of her life, and allowing for the overcoming of challenges across different contexts and time dimensions. With the qualities "inherited" from her grandmother
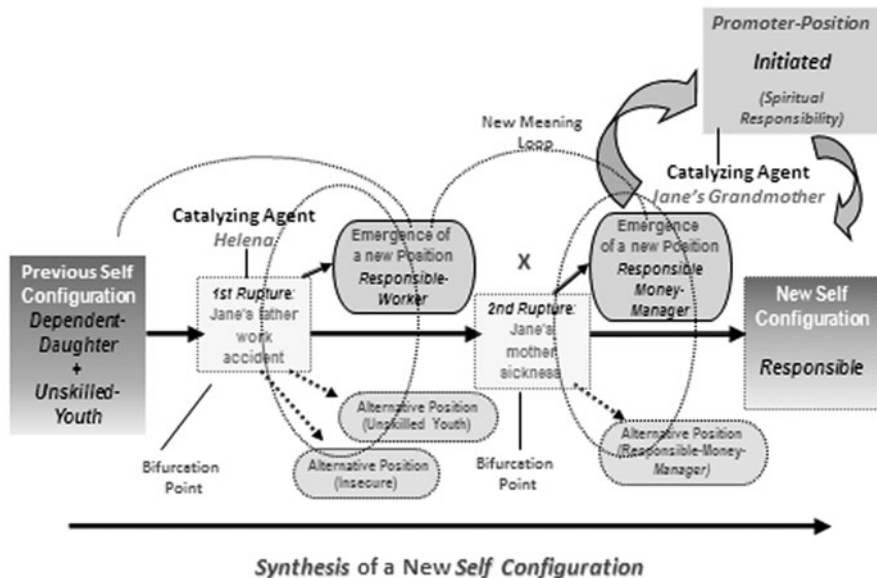
Fig. 9.2 Emerging differentiation generating Jane's life trajectory

(her *spirituality*), Jane could reposition herself in the present moment as well as towards the future, which became populated by *alternative ways of being* (she has become a university student, began to have dreams of her own, and was "seeking to be happy").

As illustrated by Fig. 9.2, Jane could forge a life trajectory that had a certain direction, as a result of emerging differentiation at bifurcation points.

As we can see in Fig. 9.2, emerging differentiation at specific bifurcation points of a young person's life trajectory (1st and 2nd rupture) can be seen as *meaning-loops* that bring out new *promoter positions* to operate in the self-system. Triggered by dialogical relations with significant others who acted as catalyzing agents (i.e., Helena and Jane's grandmother), these *promoter positions* became prominent in the landscape of different spheres of life. However, emerging differentiation may bring in new tensions, because development is not a peaceful, tautological movement. Development occurs through *catalytic cycles of innovation* that are capable of *interweaving various spheres of experience* as well as *time perspectives*. In Jane's case, initial meanings and positions built in the work sphere were amplified and knitted ambivalent meanings and positions from other spheres of experience. Jane's initial perspectives of being—her initial self-version that was operating at the time of the first interview—were reconfigured to a new time perspective that included both her *inherited past* (the spiritual qualities she "inherited" from her grandmother) and her *future to come*, as possible "becomings," possible "comings-into-being" or alternative ways of being—that include professional life as well as spiritual life.

This movement of internal *scaffolding* within the dialogical self, begins with exchanges with significant others acting as *catalyzing agents* and not only as *resources* for the self. These dynamics take place simultaneously *between different spheres of experience*, and *between different levels of experience* (i.e., from more concrete meanings—constructed in everyday fields of experience—towards more *abstracted and hypergeneralized meanings*). Jane's recurrent *meaning-loops* show that, in order to overcome ambivalences she had to search for signs at a higher level of generalization, such as "interpersonal responsibility" and "spiritual responsibility". Overcoming uncertainty emerges through building meaning bridges as Jane reaches for *hypergeneralized signs* to act as promoters of her development, integrating multiple spheres of experience, designing a new life trajectory.

The active role of *catalyzing agents* was crucial in Jane's transformations. Catalyzing agents such as Helena and Jane's grandmother facilitated the emergence of a new synthesis in Jane's self-configurations, as they enabled the emergence of *promoter* self-positions. We suggest that these significant others can be regarded as *temporary embodiments of the catalytic function*, as they embody, in interactions taking place at specific windows of time, the contextual conditions that may organize higher levels of experience. These significant others, therefore, may that *take on the catalytic function and enable a specific direction for change*, anticipating certain types of recognition the person may get in the future. Specifically, only after Helena's and her grandmother's recognition and acknowledgement of alternative positions—only after being "imaginatively" put by these women into a more powerful position—could Jane position her own *self* that way, voice these meanings for herself, and feel empowered.

This analysis, therefore, illustrated how *catalyzing agents* may operate between the *micro-* as well as *mesogenetic* levels of a young person's development, fostering the emergence of *promoter* self-positions, helping to create meaning bridges between past and future (projected) positions, and validating these new meanings in a broader context, giving a social framework to personal events happening in a life trajectory. Along these lines, we suggest that *catalyzing agents* might play an active role in transition to adulthood, especially when youth undergo processes of rupture transition in their developmental pathways, affording social recognition of young people's new emergent meanings, and helping youth become more resourceful and empowered.

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