

Chapter 7

A Semiotic Approach to Developmental Transitions: A Young Woman's Dedication to Religious Consecrated Life



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Our main goal in this text is to provide some contribution to the contemporary theoretical discussion in developmental psychology, particularly concerning how developmental trajectories take place after the second decade of a person's life course, a time that, in Western cultures, coincides with the transition to adulthood. With this purpose in mind, we elaborate on three conceptual elements considered as inherent conditions to human development. They are: (a) the systemic, integrated, nature of the development of psychological functions, in terms of continuity/discontinuity, here represented by the concept of trajectory; (b) the irreversibility of time and the future-oriented perspective regarding human development; and (c) the semiotic character of psychological transformation, i.e., the subject conceptualized as a sign. First, the notion of *trajectory* allows for a shift in the psychological analytical focus, from isolated functions and processes towards the person's totality and complexity throughout the life course. Each biography is unique, idiosyncratic, and each person's trajectory is marked by ruptures and reconfigurations due to interactions between unpredictable experiences and the person's own motivation system. In other words, human life is not a continuing string throughout one's living. Instead, development is about a multiplicity of ends, directions, and processes, defining a potentially endless process, better represented by means of an expanding rhizome. This botanic concept refers to a network of plants growing without an only kernel, showing many, visible and invisible, intermingled roots. Its continuous development rests not only on the growth of the original structure but also on the emergence of new stalks growing

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out from different points in the main bulb. According to this perspective, each “Y” figured in one’s trajectory corresponds to a certain lived experience perceived by the subject as a turning point. Each bifurcation is an opportunity so that innovative forms of self-organization are made possible (Anisov, 2001, cited in Sato & Valsiner, 2010).

Second, the idea of irreversible time is very important in this perspective. The irreversible flux of time is based on the notion of *durée*, concept proposed by the French philosopher Henri Bergson. According to Lyra (2007), the Bergsonian inspiration about the irreversible time points to “the comprehension that each element in the developmental process has to be considered as being modified—or that could eventually be modified—considering its transformative capability during the course of the process” (p. 87). Thus, irreversibility is about historic time, which is open to some future possibilities and closed to other ones along the developmental process of a given system.

Third, the concept of semiotic complexes is here adopted as an idea under construction, inspired by C. S. Peirce’s and Lev Vygotsky’s legacies. Semiotic complexes, we argue, refer to the *modus operandi* of signs within the person (sense) that are highly affect-loaded and, for this reason, are initially organized not as a logic system, but according to a subjective, affective and values-based logic that generates a tension between existing signs. Semiotic complexes refer to the micro-genetic processes in-between developmental processes. As far as these complexes are transformed into new signs recognized and assumed by the person, they are incorporated into the self-system, contribute to transforming the I-positions, and generate new hierarchies within the system.

The idea of semiotic complexes represents our theoretical effort to insert semiosis in a general frame for the interpretation of psychological changes. From Vygotsky, we borrow the idea of a complex, especially his elaborations on the construction of thought and language in infancy, precisely the distinction he makes between conceptual and complex thinking. Vygotsky considers that, in its origin, cognitive functions are presided by affectivity. The evolving capacity of conceiving of reality in logical terms then leads to the development of conceptual thinking. Hence, complexes are an underdeveloped version of conceptual thought, mostly present in children’s play and social activities (Vygotsky, 2001). While complexes are constructed according to the laws of proximity with other complexes, true concepts are characterized by an objective, abstract and logical links with reality, being, therefore, supposedly “clean” of the interference of the thinker’s affectivity and subjectivity. In retrieving, here, the notion of complex, integrated to the semiotic approach to human development, we intend to highlight the relevance and the genetic role played by those illogical processes—more related to affectivity than to rationality and distanced from the imperatives of materiality. Because of these characteristics, such processes can inflate imagination, creating a tension between the past and the future, and driving self-projections towards the future. We insist that these processes are essential so that one can boost the construction of innovative self-images and self-narratives.

The intrinsic relation between semiotic complexes and imagined futures, above emphasized, is perfectly coherent with cultural psychology. However, due to the

emphasis given by cultural psychology to meaning-making processes, this theoretical approach needs a theory of signs that considers the interdependence of semiosis and human development. Different versions of Semiotics may have influenced cultural psychology theorists but with the interest in human development in mind, we are particularly interested in Ch. S. Peirce's contribution.

Peirce's triadic theory of signs (Pietarinen, 2015), as well as his ideas concerning scientific methods and modes of inference (with emphasis on the *abductive* method), and the concept of *interpretant*—conceived as the generative power of semiosis to create new signs—all inspire our view of semiotic complexes and their influence over human development. However, we should emphasize that the way we approach Peircean Semiotics represents an alternative path relative to Peirce's original epistemological project. He criticized psychologism and the simplistic imbrication between meanings and mind favored by the rationalist bias of modern psychology (see Chap. 11 in this book). Coherent with these critics, Peirce's theory aimed at creating an explanatory model capable of approaching meaning generation that totally excluded the human mind and this position cannot be disregarded when we consider his contributions to developmental psychology.

We conceive of semiotic complexes¹ as symbolic unities that bind together aspects of the collective culture and the subject's personal culture, through the mediation of the latter's own affects and agency. Semiotic complexes always emerge—or are (re)combined—in specific fields of personal experience. They function as quasi-structured zones that host unstructured forms of semiosis and, consequently, create a zone of instability within the system prompting the development of the psychological system as a whole.

Semiotic complexes are about self-system development, in case we consider development as a sequence of interdependent events of a meaning generation that creates a zone of increasing tension within the self-system. The novel meanings, considering the tension they tend to provoke, pave the path for a growing integration within and between I-positions, outer positions, and alterities, in a higher semiotic and psychological hierarchy. As semiotic complexes define conditions and restrictions for human action, they also delineate the person's "semiotic skin" (Nedergaard, 2016), affecting the way one tends to see and feel about him/herself and the reality, building provisional self-defined limits between inner and outer world. However, those tendencies are not fixed because semiotic complexes are highly dynamic, continually transforming themselves and the I-positions they inhabit—and potentially transform—along the irreversible time.

In Fig. 7.1, we see a diagram of affective-semiotic processes and social transactions occurring within, and in relation to, the dialogical self-system, according to Roncancio e Branco (2014).

¹The effort to understand the evolving relationship of meaning, affectivity and psyché was originally made by Valsiner's (2001) semiotic-affective fields theory. The semiotic complexes share with semiotic-affective fields the unaware nature of its functioning, corresponding to some phenomena located between levels 1 and 2 of the semiotic hierarchy proposed by the author. However, the non-hierarchical, fuzzy aspect of this level of semiotic elaboration makes the difference between semiotic complexes and semiotic fields (Valsiner, 2001).

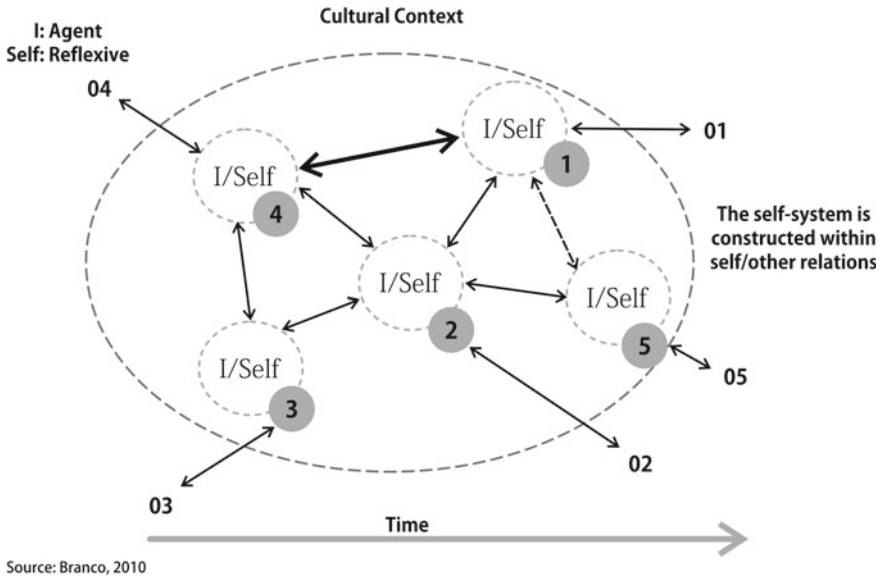


Fig. 7.1 The dynamic formation of the dialogical self-system (Roncancio & Branco, 2014, after Branco, 2010)

- O = different social others
- I/Self = different self positionings.

Considering the general dialogical self-system structure depicted in Fig. 7.1—including the I/self positioning, the cultural context populated by significant social others, and flow of time—new semiotic complexes may emerge at any point of this system, at any time. They emerge whenever an unexpected event creates a new interpretant, altering the person’s affective orientation, producing new semiosis, and enhancing development. Based on Fig. 7.1 we can advance on the conceptualization of the “semiotic complex”, considering a hypothetical zoom in at a given point and moment in which an actual event affects the self-system, provoking a wave of sense-making, originally miscellaneous and disorganized, the phenomenon we call the semiotic complex. Semiotic complexes are always emerging within the self-system, but, as a process mediated by affectivity, it is not at all limited to the here-and-now experience. Into the present experience, elements of past events recollected by the work of memory are there included, as well as elements of anticipated imagined futures also are. The same happens regarding the context. Physical and symbolic boundaries are necessary to constrain the dialogical self-system, offering it a framework for action, interaction, and the construction of self-narratives. But they cannot prevent the self from developing thanks to the many sources of signs and experiences provided by culture and society (languages, collective signs, values).

Human beings are animals whose main feature is to engage in endless processes of meaning production. Sign generation is the core aspect of human development,

guiding the delineation of self-trajectories. The radical openness of semiosis leads individuals to abdicate the certainty of the past and face the unpredictable, uncertain future. Meanings are produced upon the unstable balance between personal motivations and the vast scope of materials provided by spheres of social activities within organizations, institutions, and communities. Family, schools, peer groups and other social scenarios guide individual actions, offering basic flexible conditions for human conduct and suggesting a *menu* of obligations, needs, and constraints. However, sociocultural contexts are unable to totally control subjectivity: there is always room for personal freedom and resistance as part of human agency. Then novelties emerge, and new semiotic complexes operate.

Culture and the Dialogical Nature of Human Psychological Processes: Youth in Focus

Dialogical psychology is an interdisciplinary project constructed along the last three decades, although its roots can be found in much older epistemological grounds. The two core ideas sustaining dialogical psychology rest upon the intrinsic interdependence between culture and subjectivity, and in the relational nature of human development—individuals affect and are affected by other individuals according to a bidirectional process. Here we elaborate on the cultural mediation of the self (as agent and narrator), and how such processes have an effect on young people's developmental processes.

From a Semiotic Cultural psychology standpoint, human mind arises as a consequence of the extended historic development of humankind, together with a diversified set of events. The last refers to (a) organic and body modifications that enable human capabilities as a whole; (b) changes concerning social needs and their relation with human transformative interventions upon nature and environment; (c) the emergence of novel forms of social activities, such as work, conceived here as the intentional transformation of reality; and (d) the cultural mediation of human development.

Mediation involves context-situated processes and follows a dialectic transformative logic, which unites present, past and future (Cole, 1995, 1996). The present experience is a boundary experience between self and culture, the crossing point between symbolic (re)constructions of the past, on the one hand, and the imaginative anticipation of the future, on the other. This particular feature will condition the imaginative creation of future achievements, going beyond the limits of the living experience. In this case, signs act as semiotic splices that mediate and regulate human experiences, providing subjects with a frame for their action in the broadest sense (Valsiner, 2002, 2004, 2012).

It is probably no coincidence that the first work of Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon (1992) about the dialogical self was published, approximately, at the same time that Bruner presented his work concerning the relation between culture and

subjectivity (Bruner, 2004). In Bruner's work, he coined the term "self-narrative" as referring to stories constructed in people's minds and told by them to express the continuous autobiographical (re)interpretations of experience. The concept of "self-narrative", as well as the "dialogical self", emphasizes the role of culture-based semiotic systems regarding the discursive construction of the self. The self is, thus, defined as a "storied self", structured as a text produced by the subject in collaboration with his/her group and community, in order to attend to a personal need (Richardson, Rogers, & McCarroll, 1998) and to organize the person's whole existence in a coherent and cohesive time-space unity.

The stories each person elaborates to narrate her identity are unique, innovative, but they do not ignore renewed suggestions offered by the socioculture. The self consists of a dynamic discursive account of oneself, a rich *composée* of collective and personal narratives within concrete lived contexts (Macedo & Silveira, 2012). Dialogues, real or imagined, always take place within socially constructed semiotic structures and these structures function as more or less stable patterns of coordinated activities that provide dialogues with a frame, a goal and a scope. In sum, the self is a dynamic system alternating states of stability and change. These alternative states emerge as a result of a never-ending negotiation engaging the voices that inhabit the self, as well as the ideological positions expressed in the transactions between the self and the institutional, and sociocultural, living contexts. The development of one's self-system is constituted by the dialogical relations involving cognition, affectivity, and action (Valsiner, 2007) in situated contexts. Change derives from innovative creations that emerge from intra- and interpersonal semiotic transactions (Fogel, Koeyer, Bellagamba & Bell, 2002).

Mattos (2013) and colleagues (Mattos & Chaves, 2013; Mattos & Volkmer, in this volume) explored how social interactions with meaningful alterities participate in the reorganization of the self-system during the second decade of one's life and beyond. The authors emphasize four elements in their work: promoter signs (which work as catalysts, resources for human development); inhibitor signs (which prevent individuals from searching for innovative developmental trajectories); alterities (meaningful social others); and (intrapsychic) I-positions available at a given moment of one's biography. Such factors invigorated adolescents' future plans and perspectives, favoring adequate conditions for their "becoming", i.e., making a diachronic movement integrating the constructed past, the imagined future, and present-time experiences. Preserving the self's dynamism is an essential condition for the adolescent to handle the increasing limits of his sociocultural world and to construct innovative alternatives for the future, thanks to a new self-architecture. In Western societies, strongly driven by values like economic growth and productivity, young individuals feel pressed to adjust themselves to idealized adult-like social positions. For this reason, they are strongly oriented towards paying more attention to the future, what generates novel zones of tension given the future uncertainty. One source of tension is the emergent conflict between the characteristic sense of immediacy and urgency observed in adolescence, and their increasing awareness of the long steps necessary to fulfil the complex goals that capitalist societies set to new generations. Consequently, adolescents' self-systems go through intense reconfigurations due to

the social-institutional canalization of their I-projections. Their self-systems' inner dynamics and development are canalized by a broad scope of signs, associated with different spheres of activity. Some examples are the phases of the academic life, the transition to work, their new role as citizens, and the new qualities of their relationship with family, friends, and other people, in terms of sexuality, affectivity, identity, so on and so forth.

Tensions, ambivalences, and uncertainties emerging in the self–other–world relationships are essential aspects of human development, in special the development of innovative meanings and the emergence of new I/self-positions, according to the dialogical self-perspective. They represent points of rupture or bifurcation within one's trajectory (Zittoun & Perret-Clermont, 2009), acting as developmental catalysts that induce the subject to semiosis generation, and, at the same time, to a broad psychic reorganization in face of this novelty. For Zittoun and Perret-Clermont (2009), the term “developmental transition” refers to core processes thanks to which subjects are pushed on the direction of qualitative new levels of psychic functioning, in order to deal with the kind of experiences that break with the balance of the self-system, and leads to the necessity of re-establishing the sense of self-ness and self-continuity. Material, symbolic, and social resources are tools needed for the person to rescue the internal flexibility of the self-system re-configuration.

It is very important to consider the peculiarities of contexts lived by a person in an analysis of human development. Developmental psychology has usually focused on the peculiarities of the macro context (the sociocultural environment in a broad sense) or the micro-genetic setting, either. In the next section, we explore the role of the different spheres of activity lived by a young woman being educated for a consecrated religious life, the case to be analyzed further, as a theoretical contribution to the role played by the meso context to enhancing human development.

Spheres of Activity and Human Development: The Formation for a Consecrated Religious Life

Sociocultural and institutional contexts are complex systems whose subsystems coexist and develop throughout tensions and contradictions emerging among them. An important contribution of Activity Theory (Leontiev, 2004) is to highlight the intrinsic interrelations between human actions and socio-institutional scenarios, in which action takes place. Each activity sphere embraces specific possibilities for action, becoming the stage for social phenomena's construction and transformation. This generative feature turns the activity into a constitutive dimension of mental life, essential for understanding the genesis of psychological phenomena. Spheres of activity are dynamic systems that usually undergo a double-sided pressure towards conservation and transformation in the irreversible time, according to new social needs and motivations.

In the following sections, we will present part of the results of a qualitative study that originally investigated young people attending to four Catholic educational institutions dedicated to educate men and women for a consecrated religious life. Cloisters are an unparalleled sphere of activity, considering its particular way of dealing with vocation and consecration, but in terms of institutional rules, power games, and intrinsic dialogical tensions, they are pretty similar to other normative developmental contexts, such as families and schools. In most of these settings, personal trajectories are constructed as the result of active negotiations between social pressures and personal motivations. What distinguishes them is the balance point between both sides.

We assume here a cultural stance on vocation and understand religious vocation as an arrangement intermingling one's personal history and her sociocultural context, constructed by means of religious and non-religious experiences. Vocation for a consecrated life is about the internalization of perspectives, positions, values and discourses negotiated within everyday life transactions, and in different experiences mediated by religious people, contexts of religiosity, and faith. As a complex of cultural systems, personal world views and groups' beliefs, religious contexts suggest symbols and meanings that become deeply integrated to the believer's modes of being and feeling, not only in the church but in different spheres of activity. For Catholic believers, for instance, religious symbols such as saints and the Christian God are core alterities that actively contribute to sustain certain positions within the self-system. For religious consecrated novices, additionally, religiosity is converted into the main (or the only) normative developmental context, the main source of guidance for their self-development, which canalizes the emerging forms of self-interpretation of past experiences and the construction of their imagined futures.

Cecilia's Case

Cecilia's (fictitious name) case is part of a research project composed of four longitudinal case studies (Araújo, 2016). Participants were 19–24 year-old candidates to the novitiate in the first stage of formation for a consecrated religious life at a Catholic institution (as priests or nuns). About 15 months after the first interview, a second interview took place at the time most participants had professed their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, what characterizes the beginning of their religious life as part of the Catholic church.²

Before entering religious life, at age 14, Cecilia had her first work experience as an intern at a public institution, and, there, she developed a strong motivation to pass in public service examinations. For five consecutive years, parallel to her duties as a middle school student and an intern at work, she studied to grant a work position in the Brazilian Federal Public Ministry (acronym, MPU). According to her, failing

²For more information on the pathways to a consecrated religious life, see Code of Canonical Rights cited by Araújo (2016).

that exam discouraged her to study any further. After that episode, at age 19, a friend invited her to become a member of a teenagers' group linked to the Catholic parish near her place. By that time, no longer motivated for preparatory studies to access the public service, and engaged with church pastoral activities, she wanted to know more about consecrated religious life, and considered, for the first time, the possibility of becoming a nun.

At the time of the first interview, age 23, Cecilia had been living in the convent for approximately one year and was about to experience an important institutional rite of passage: to receive the religious habit. The ritual of receiving the habit in this specific religious Catholic institution is celebrated during a mass, in which the prospective candidate receives the official garment of the congregation (the religious habit). To wear these clothes usually represents a public sign of institutional belonging. Two other sacramental events are celebrated in the same ceremony: the beginning of the *noviciate*³ and the announcement of the person's new religious name. According to the rule, this name is defined by the religious advisor, responsible for guiding the person along her religious formation. The chosen name represents the mission to be embraced by the individual from that moment on, particularly after her definitive consecration (denominated perpetual consecration). The perpetual consecration comes after the public celebration of the religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

In the second interview, 19 months after the first one, and after the above-mentioned ritual, the episodes she narrated in the first interview were deeply re-elaborated, as she explored her future perspectives. At the time, she was at her noviciate's second year. She was wearing her religious habit—the official novice's garment—and used the religious name chosen for her, but she had not professed her vows. The focus of both interviews was on her developmental trajectory, encouraging her to explore feedback and feed-forward semiotic movements arising from possible semiotic tensions concerning her future as a consecrated woman.

Some aspects particularly captured our attention throughout the analyses. They suggested Cecilia's transition from a liberal, secular, individualistic stance upon life—in which her own goals prevailed—to a decentered perspective, in which religious and institutional values surpassed Cecilia's expectations and desires. So far, two spheres of activity had a strong regulatory function in her life trajectory: in early adolescence, the "work sphere"; and later, the "religious sphere". Both had a considerable role in Cecilia's self-organization, and in the canalization of her future developmental trajectory. This transition, which was not a simple one, marked by intern conflicts, gave birth to Cecilia's new I-position named "I as devoted to religious life". Next, we analyze the main dialogical tensions that emerged between the experienced institutional rites and her self-organizational processes, mainly associated with receiving the habit and the change of her name.

³Noviciate is an important stage of formation for the candidate to a religious consecrated life. It has a duration of 12–24 month, finalizing with the First Temporary Profession, the moment in which religious votes are publicly professed: poverty, chastity and obedience. The noviciate finishes with the profession of votes, the beginning of the proper religious life, and the person is acknowledged as religiously consecrated (by the community and by the Catholic Church).

Cecilia's Semiotic Complexes and Anticipated Futures

The immersion of the subject into novel and different spheres of experience enables the emergence of innovative dynamics of meaning production, affecting the person as a whole, and requiring new forms of self-organization. Considering development as semiotic transformation, and taking into account the socio-historical nature of signs (Peirce, 1955), it is necessary to investigate how signs (trans) form and generate other signs in irreversible time. The continuous movements of rupture/transition experienced by Cecilia is the main focus of our analysis, which takes into account her spheres of experience related to work and religion.

The Work Sphere of Experience: “*I just Want to Be Independent*”

In the first interview, Cecilia reports a sequence of personal movements towards new meanings (autonomy, independence) and self-projections towards the future (to become a public server, to participate of public service exams), associated to her first work experience as an intern. She expressed herself as follows:

Really, *a considerable change* took place when I was 13, 14, when I wanted, because I wanted to work...” ‘No, I’ll do something to work (...), *I want to be independent*, I want to do my things’ (...). I worked in Bank of Brazil, in MPU, there was my first internship. Well, then I began to study for public service exams (...) *I liked a lot* the work environment and people there, *so I said: ‘I’ll study to come back there’* (...) *That was my goal* (...) also being influenced by the work there, right?, (...) in the public office, everybody says so (...) I studied in the morning, I worked in the afternoon and at night, I took prep classes (...) My goal was to pass the public service exams and go to law school, because I was in this branch (...) *I very much wanted* my mum would let me work, *so my parents could have a better life*. I very much wanted the good of my family. (...) And also *my freedom* (...) *I almost didn’t go home*, just went home to sleep (...) because of the job. I think that *you become more independent*. I wanted to do this, I’ll do it. To have my money.’ (...) *I became a little harsh at home*, there, a teenager thing (...) I studied a lot, I did everything I could (...) *I didn’t go to church anymore! I hang out with friends*”. (Cecilia, 1st interview—emphasis added).

In her statements, Cecilia mentions a strong desire to be independent, and this independence was first experienced at work, as an intern. She sees this experience as the first step towards providing her parents with a better life through a “good job” as a public server, preceded by a hard time dedicated to prep classes. However, this did not help her to succeed in the exams. Cecilia experienced failure as a great disappointment, as a disruptive event that prompted the emergence of a new future perspective.

Generation of new meanings can be anchored in existing personal or sociocultural meanings (Peirce, 1955; Valsiner, 2012). Existing sign-systems function as constraints, defining limits and possibilities to personal meaning-making. In Cecilia’s case, her pursuit of independence/autonomy, and her belief this could be accomplished by working in the public service, is understandable as a unique synthesis

between alternative semiotic fields. Cecilia's own desires, affections and goal orientations, on the one hand, and a specific arrangement of signs provided by the collective culture together with opportunities offered by the social environment, on the other. Her first work experience was in a public institution (MPU) that pays one of the highest salaries in the public sector. In that work environment, she felt welcome and warmly treated. Thus, a dialogical tension emerges between two spheres of activity: the *work sphere of activity*, in which "work" is highly regarded as a means to access independence, and *the ragged edge socioeconomic and material reality of her family*. Anchored on this tension, Cecilia constructs a semiotic hierarchy guided by the sign "*independence*" and by the position "*I as independent*".

According to Valsiner (2008), the hierarchy of affective-semiotic fields is an exclusively human psychological feature. Affective-semiotic fields are constructed through a mechanism named "*generalized abstraction*". The abstraction occurs by means of subsequent processes of separation between the meaning and the referent of a sign by the action of logic interpretants. *Abstraction* refers to a mechanism through which a sign becomes independent from the original referent and turns into functioning as a regulatory force, guiding future situations different from the original ones. The sign's *regulatory power* works as follows: the higher the affective valence associated to that sign in a given socioculture, the broader the scope of the scenarios this sign may regulate. The new emerging regulatory sign is no more related to only one referent, it is progressively converted, by means of abstraction, into an innovative sign, corresponding to the idea of a *hypergeneralized sign* (Branco & Valsiner, 2010; Valsiner, 2005).

The sign "*independence*" is highly valued in capitalist, liberal and individualistic societies, belonging to a set of social meanings internalized by the subject and converted into semiotic regulators of his actions (self-regulation). Therefore, "*independence*" became a hypergeneralized sign that regulated Cecilia's motivational system and directed her expectations concerning the world of work. The *search for independence* was what mobilized her, allowing for the creation of semiotic tools that guided her conduct (i.e., prep classes, restless effort). This sign—*independence*—also helped her to handle the tensions emerging in her self-system, related to her experience as an intern, and to her adaptation to new challenges (i.e., to study morning and night, go to work, and have no time to rest). All this would lead to her final goal: to enter the world of work as a public server in the future.

Cecilia's experience as a worker-student preparing for the exams enabled the emergence of specific future perspectives for her life, canalizing modes of being and feeling in different contexts. Social relationships related to her professional environment functioned as a scaffold, generating new meanings related to her *search for independence*. Amidst those semiotic processes, Cecilia lived novel personal synthesis, and reorganized her hierarchy of meanings, enabling the emergence of higher levels of abstraction. Nevertheless, her failing the exams caused a deep jolt in Cecilia and functioned as a rupture. This called for a re-signification of her life condition—then characterized by her strenuous preparation for the public service exams—and a re-orientation of her imagined future, hosting alternative possibilities to a career as public employee.

The Religious-Related Group's Sphere of Experience: "That Was the Starting Point for Me Being Here"

Cecilia's failure to pass the difficult exam to grant herself a public service position was a great disappointment, bringing up miscellaneous feelings about her life and future. These feelings finally led to issues of religiosity and vocation for consecrated religious life gaining a new relevance to her. The event reforce, an invitation to integrate a group of Catholic teenagers allowed for the emergence of new effects and imagined futures:

I wasn't feeling desperate, but *I was really upset*, for I worked very, very, hard (...) Then I cooled off, and did not study for one month or so, I didn't touch any book (...) *I hadn't given up, but also hadn't that boost* (...) At the time, I got to know a friend, right? He was from Church, and told me about a group called AJIR, which means "Love Jesus in the Brother in the Street". It is a street pastoral, and I got interested, *I thought, the work that they do is beautiful. I went to visit the group* (...), *this was the startingpoint for me being here today*. (Cecilia—1st interview—emphasis added).

Then I learned more what *misery and mercy* actually were. (...) *It was a real big impact* (...), and many people talked to us about God. Instead of talking to them, they were talking to us. In a way, *I saw the mercy, the love of God* in each of the brothers in the street. *This had a major impact upon me, to see how everything that we suffered in our family* [as a consequence of lack of money], right? That problem is nothing in comparison to what they had to go through, right? We went underneath the bridges and this, for me, was enough *to see my life with other eyes*. See that *I was complaining and grumbling too much* (...) so there, I... *I had this encounter with God, too* (...) also because of the *friends I met* in the AJIR, those weren't friends to hang out with, or so. They were people that sought for God. *They pursued to live a righteous life*.

They lived in rightness precisely as our *Catholic faith* prescribes. Hence, that *called my attention a lot. I wanted to be always with them*. For seeing that, they *always seeking the truth*, seeking to help one another (...) they *were all very much united* (...). It was him (my friend) who showed me, talked to me, *what vocation is like* (...). It was in the second year of AJIR when we started talking about this. It was *when it properly awoke within myself, the call for vocation...* for seeking more for God. (Cecilia—2nd interview—emphasis added).

The main point here is the semiotic shift concerning Cecilia's autonomous self-image and the understanding of her family difficulties after participating in the religious voluntary work. In the narrative sequences transcribed above, two semiotic complexes can be identified, and seem to produce a dialogical tension: one the one hand, she felt disappointed, emotionally miserable for her failure, and on the other, she testified mercy, love, and hope in the new voluntary religious activity.

In other words, her affective disposition related to the imagined future I-position "*I as public server*" seemed to have lost the centrality it used to have, and this change opened up space for a novel dialogical tension, and a re-evaluation of her ongoing trajectory, enabling her to try out new experiences. As Cecilia increasingly valued the religious sphere, to prepare for public service exams started losing its relevance in her self-system. Religiosity now guided her to a new imagined trajectory, and performed a more important role in her development.

The encounter with the religious teenager's group moved Cecilia's main interest towards a new sphere of experience, her Encounter with God. Those shared experiences also enabled the transformation of a cultural element, the street pastoral, into a symbolic resource that suggested new modes of acting and feeling prospective, in the pursuit of new integration and different meanings to support her sense of self-continuity. In sum, the street pastoral canalized the construction of new personal meanings, enabling the reinterpretation of her lived trajectory in coordination with a new horizon:

I began to have *another perspective* (...) *I wanted to help* more, I wanted to *serve God*(...) this was my conversion, when I said "No, not that, *my life is not ruled by all of that, the goods, the material, the money*" (...) I stopped studying and really dedicated myself to this. I grew up in a family with values (...), *we were always educated in faith* (...) my family was always *very united* (...) my mum passed this on to me, *love your neighbour* (...) she always helped neighbours a lot (...) and *this is exactly what the AJIR group is*, help the brother in the streets (...) charity was the reason I went to AJIR. (Cecilia—1st interview—emphasis added).

The new orientation given to her life trajectory, associated to AJIR group, provided Cecilia with symbolic resources to sustain what she envisioned as her *religious conversion*. The activities developed during the pastoral work—to pray, to help neighbours, to work to get donations to people living in the streets, to share feelings and beliefs—functioned as a frame for Cecilia's psychological system, canalizing her experience and mediating the emergence of new values and meanings according to a new hierarchical organization. An innovative semiotic complex emerged related to the sign "*Encounter with God*", a new synthesis for her experiences in the religious context, and the new alterities she met. This semiotic complex was responsible for a zone of dialogical tension that turned possible a novel personal synthesis, partially composed by new signs, and partially by (re)elaborated ones (since Cecilia comes from a religious family). The new I-position "*I as religiously consecrated*" progressively assumed a central position amidst the various possibilities at stake, more and more intimately sustained by an innate religious vocational discourse.

Cultural elements convert into symbolic resources when they are taken as such by the person's structure of emotionally significant relationships. It happens through the legitimization of a new cycle of personal meanings. For Cecilia, the friend who introduced her to the AJIR group legitimized those new emerging meanings. Hence, the experiential field of the street pastoral probably generated tensions and a deep transformation in Cecilia, leading to a global transformation of her self-system as a whole, through innovative processes of meaning generation. The mode she projects herself on a possible future deeply changed: "*It was when it properly awoke within myself, the call for vocation*".

The Religious Institution Sphere of Experience: “The Day I Received the Habit Was a Great Ordeal”

It is this [great] expectation of receiving the habit (...) [but] it wasn't like *anything that I had imagined* (...); the whole rite was different (...). *I was so sad*, because it was not like I figured, it was not the way *I wanted*, that I was imagining (...). I cried all the time (...) *the day I received the habit was a great ordeal*(...), the place I was during the mass, it wasn't like before. I stayed normal, as everyone else (...) *today I see* that all that was for me to grow in my spiritual life (...). All that was *God's providence*, so, for my soul, *for my sanctification* (...) in the convent itself, we don't do what we want, right? *This is God's will*. We have to be open to whatever He commands, to *obey* (...) it was not what I wanted, *because I wanted* (...) Here, it's not *external things* that count. It is the interior (...) I had exactly what I asked for! I said this to Jesus, *along time after that*, right? Because that day, I didn't understand anything! (...) And really, it was only what *He allowed me* to live (...) It was an opportunity to get to know myself, of *self-acknowledgment*, of Jesus saying what He wants from me. *Only my 'yes'* (...) Because we, inside here, it is a *constant purification*, that is, of one's own will (...) today I see that *I was very much* [concerned] about external things (...) *I was very much based in what the rite would be*, in what the celebration was about. I wanted, thus, to be seen by others in the mass (...). Then *it was all taken* from me! *It was a great ordeal*. (Cecilia—2nd interview—emphasis added).

The habit of receiving celebration turned out to be an ambivalent experience to Cecilia, meaning a new rupture in her previous self-trajectory, smoothly sliding into the certainty of her innate religious vocation. What actually happened during the rite exposed her to a dialogical tension between the religious institution's pedagogy and norms, and her own motivational system and expectations constructed from her different experiences lived in several spheres of activity. In her soul, Cecilia said, she was proud of herself for taking the vows. She expected to have her presence noticed, and take part in a special ceremony, instead of an ordinary mass. She cried due to her disappointment, and not out of joy. In a way, her feelings associated to taking the vows were similar to those of passing the exams, nurtured in the past.

However, according to the religious order, this could be a problem. The novitiate consists of a time for vocational discernment. Most formative experiences lived by the candidates during the initial stage are expected to provide the novice with higher levels of self-reflection and spirituality, aiming at her understanding of the challenges and obligations related to consecration. Therefore, from the institution's perspective, the conscious identification of the novice with the self-position “*I as religiously consecrated*” is expected before she receives the habit, considered the first big step towards a consecrated religious life. She said she was reprimanded by the religious supervisor after the ceremony because she considered Cecilia's behavior could be an evidence that she was not ready for consecration. Cecilia's narratives in the second interview suggest that the supervisor was probably right, the most significant personal developmental changes had taken place later on.

Concluding Remarks

Our main goal in this chapter was to provide a theoretical contribution to developmental psychology. The theoretical effort to elaborate on the constitutive role of signs in developmental processes in different moments of a life trajectory involves a micro-genetic view over the relations between an emerging sign and those signs that existed before. Based on Cecilia's narratives about her life trajectory up to the moment of the second interview, we want to emphasize the interdependence of mesogenesis and microgenesis in the generation of a developmental rupture. Our contribution, here, consists of making a point about the semiotic nature of developmental shifts, as we consider the role of semiotic complexes as an interesting conceptual alternative to mediate the understanding of the generative role of signs in human development. In sum, the growth of dialogical tensions existing between signs provokes the emergence of a disruption in the self-system and creates the basis for its future organization.

Cecilia's case beautifully illustrates how a personal motivational system and objective social conditions intermingle along one's biography, and how the person actively constructs the future on tensions emerging from the fleeting, ephemeral present. Different narratives provided by Cecilia along the two research interviews may support this analysis, but we want to focus just on the episode of the ceremony when she received a new name and her new religious garment. This event led to a semiotic clash between her personal dispositions and expectations (concerning the I-position "I as a nun") and the institutional values, rules and authority. A huge tension coexisted in her self-system, confronting the institutional values and those values still nurtured by her self-system, and this caused her contradictory feelings such as anxiety, self-pity, disappointment, and doubt. Her old values system included, for instance, secular liberal values that once guided her towards economic independence and autonomy, through a possible job in the public sector. Such values were first questioned when she participated in the street pastoral, and then, were questioned again in face of Catholic values concerning consecrated vows as an irreversible and subjective profession.

As an autonomous and self-confident woman, Cecilia thought she was ready for the vows since she went to the convent, but her personal feelings concerning the ceremony of taking religious garments showed to herself and her religious supervisor that she was probably not. The simplicity of the worship, where she expected to have a gala event, and the name eventually chosen to her—, the name of a female saint who was considered as an example of humility and obedience—were institutional implicit messages, indicating how she was perceived.

The ceremony provoked in Cecilia ambivalent feelings and corresponding fuzzy meanings related to her personal motives and desires vis-à-vis the non-negotiable religious principles concerning consecration. To deal with this tension, and the emergent semiotic complex, required the mediation of a third element, in Peirce's terms, the interpretant, or the new sign that enters in the former dual relation and converts it into a triad. The new sign that emerged as a semiotic regulator of her conduct was "obedience to God's providence". *Obedience* represents the coercive force exerted

over her, resulting in the repression of her own motives. God's providence, in short, refers to adopting the belief that institutional rules name as God's will. Consequently, in the moment of the second interview, the original confusion or uncertainty gave way to a feeling of "openness to the will of God", and an "active pursuit of sanctity and purification". In a way or another, the miscellaneous feelings that once dominated her calmed down and, due to the internalization of the ruptures lived by, new I-positions emerged and hosted renovated values and affective dispositions.

We conclude by asserting that the signs co-constructed by a subject are resources she can use to handle tensions provoked by the relative chaos of novel experiences (Morasso & Zittoun, 2014; Valsiner, 2012; Zittoun, 2007), as well as to re-construct the semiotic borders of the whole lived experience. Higher level generalizable signs, such as *God's providence, obedience to church, purification, sanctity*, and so on, usually follow semiotic complexes—chaotic, disorganized, and deeply affective valence wholes. These complexes cause dialogical tensions in many directions, generating potential for the emergence of a new sign within the self.

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