REGULAR ARTICLE

Semiotic Regulation through Inhibitor Signs: Creating a Cycle of Rigid Meanings

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Abstract This study aims to analyze the process of semiotic regulation in youth transition to adulthood from the perspectives of *cultural developmental psychology* and *dialogical self theory*. The focus is on the transformations that occur in youth's self-system configurations during a critical developmental period. In this paper, we will advance the idea that semiotic regulation may lead to the construction of strong signs (i.e. those signs that bring rigidity to personal meaning systems)—and more specifically, of strong inhibitor signs—that block the emergence of alternative meanings, leading to rigidity in the self-system. We present a longitudinal case study of a young man who participated in a social project in Salvador, Bahia to illustrate the process. Data was collected through two rounds of in-depth interviews at ages 18 (1st round) and 21 (2nd round) years. Analysis followed a mapping of positions and counter-positions, as well as emerging tensions and their resolution over time and in different spheres of life (i.e. work, school, and family life). The idea is to show how negotiations of self-positions evolve and activate a mechanism of inhibition of hierarchical integration and construction of alternative future meanings, in which rigid meanings are created and do not allow for emergence of alternative life trajectories.

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Introduction

Young people's development to adulthood is one of the most critical moments in the life course, when several changes and psycho-social transformations simultaneously pervade the person and his/her context. As young people develop, they begin to navigate new spheres of experience that can bring significant ruptures to their sense of self continuity (Zittoun 2007). For instance, a sense of self discontinuity can emerge when a young person enters the world of work and starts to question what she is able to do, her position in relation to others in the new contexts, as well as her identity and the meaning of her actions. Therefore, we consider that the years of youth—especially when a young person is entering new educational or work spheres—are a crucial juncture in a person's life, a moment when there is a tendency for proliferation of complex experiences that demand the development of a person's capacity for self-organization. In this sense, we believe that youth transitions may provide a significant window for the study of the construction of self-regulatory processes related to the use of signs (semiotic mediation processes) and for the development of hierarchical semiotic control systems, as well as for the understanding of the role of catalytic processes in shaping life trajectories.

The notion of youth transitions that we elaborate here comes from ideas developed in the field of **Developmental Cultural Psychology** (Valsiner 1997, 2007, 2012; Valsiner and Rosa 2007; Zittoun 2006a, b, 2007, 2012) and *Dialogical Self Theory* (Hermans 2001; Hermans and Kempen 1995; Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 2003; Hermans and Hermans-Kanopka 2010). The aim is to go beyond traditional approaches to the phenomenon of "transition" as linear sequences 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 paper 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 (Abramo and Branco 2005; Camarano 2006; Sato 2006). We will also stress the centrality of *semiotic mediation* in human experience, and the different ways in which individuals configure their respective "*selves*" through self-positioning and repositioning along the life course (Hermans and Hermans-Kanopka 2010; Valsiner 2008; Zittoun 2007, 2008, 2012).

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* themselves rather than *outcomes* (Carugati 2004; Valsiner 2008; Zittoun 2006a, b, 2007). Developmental transitions are therefore regarded as multifaceted and mediated by the production of signs, involving *ruptures* and *bifurcation points* that allow for the emergence of novelty, as well as the promotion of a qualitative reorganization of human experience (Zittoun 2007, 2012) and of the *self system* (Hermans and Hermans-Kanopka 2010; Cunha et al. 2011). While *ruptures* correspond to discontinuities in one's life trajectory, *bifurcation points* refer to points in which alternative options emerge, leading to

different directions to be followed (Sato et al. 2009). Such a perspective highlights the processes of semiotic mediation through which both the young person and the culture he/she inhabits are mutually constituted.

In this paper, we want to elaborate on a *dialogical semiotic approach to youth transitions as a process of self-regulation that occurs within a specific time frame, involving the search for integration across spheres of life experience and across time, mediated by dialogical relations with significant others.* More specifically, *we will elaborate on the idea that semiotic barriers may be created in a life trajectory, inhibiting creative meaning-making and continued integration of life experiences across time.* This paper has three sections. The first draws on the perspectives of **Developmental Cultural Psychology** and **Dialogical Self Theory** to propose a new understanding of youth developmental transitions, highlighting both the dialogical semiotic nature of processes of self-regulation that characterize transitions and the catalytic approach to the creation of life trajectories. The second part presents a case example that illustrates how a young man—throughout a developmental period from 16 to 21 years of age—negotiates significant meanings of himself and his world, and builds a semiotic barrier to the emergence of new meanings, inhibiting the creation of alternative future trajectories. The third section demonstrates and elaborates on the dynamics underlying the processes of self-regulation by the action of inhibitor signs, leading to rigidity in the self-system.

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 is understood as *poetic motion* (from the Greek *poiesis*), because its fundamental element involves the 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 a self-catalytic and self-regulative system (i.e. a system that produces innovation by transforming its own elements, and by seeking integration across time) that orients the individual towards the future, while allowing for and restricting the emergence of new meanings, exerting flexible control over the way individuals position themselves at every moment (Valsiner 2002).

Abbey (2012a) advances the idea that meanings emerge out of a person's attempt to overcome ambivalences that appear in his relations with the world. She highlights the transformative power of ambivalences—they become the motor for transformations that occur at the *boundary zone* between the present and the future, allowing for the emergence of a pre-adaptation to the latter. This process entails the notion that the field of experience is built out of ambivalences between opposing or alternative perspectives that are inherently linked, as they exist on the basis of one another.

Therefore, as Abbey (2012b) suggests, meaning-making entails a process of overcoming ambivalences. To understand how people create meanings in their daily lives, it is necessary to consider how they deal with the levels of the tension emerging

between alternative perspectives. Along these lines, Abbey proposed three levels of ambivalence: 1) when the level of ambivalence is *null*, the person does not engage in meaning construction; 2) when the level of ambivalence is *moderate*, the person constructs meanings on an erratic basis, i.e. emerging meanings are fragile and allow for guiding actions towards changing future conditions; and 3) when ambivalence reaches the *maximum* level of tension, the person constructs either *strong signs* that brings rigidity to the meaning system, or *abandons the process* of meaning construction altogether. However, we still need to deepen our understanding of how people engage in these levels of meaning construction in different life circumstances.

A dialogical approach can be of use in understanding the process of meaning construction that emerge in youth transitions. The ***Dialogical Self Theory*** was elaborated by Hermans (2001) and colleagues (Salgado and Gonçalves 2007; Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 2003; Salgado and Hermans 2005; Hermans 2002, 2001) to highlight a dynamic and multivocal movement of construction and re-construction 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 co-exist 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 and emerges through relational encounters with multiple *alterities* 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 suggested by Hermans (2001)—a *"landscape"*) composed of relations among I-positions, which are more than merely *social roles* (socially expected roles). They refer as well to *reflexive meanings*, and *affective states* (Hermans 2001). Therefore, a specific I-position is an emerging structure in a meaning field of possible/alternative ways in which the individual positions himself in a given context. The notion of the *dialogical self* emphasizes the fluidity of voices in a field of *self* relations (Hermans and Hermans-Kanopka 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 the person navigates (Cunha et al. 2011; Cunha and Gonçalves 2009; Salgado and Gonçalves 2007; Salgado and Hermans 2005; Zittoun et al. 2012). Dealing with life's uncertainties, however, sometimes imply a process of *mutual-in-feeding* (Valsiner 2002), leading not to an overcoming of tensions and production of a new synthesis, but to cyclical relation characterized by a quick return to dominant—and sometimes negative—voices (Ribeiro and Gonçalves 2011).

A ***semiotic approach to youth transitions*** has been advanced by Zittoun (2006a, b, 2007). The author suggests that the developing person actively participates in her process of development, using symbolic resources, appropriating *signs* that are available in the collective culture, as well as recreating them from her own 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, a

semiotic dynamics is created to help the person overcome ruptures and reduce uncertainty, as well as deal with emerging feelings, as she negotiates, modifies and transforms cultural and shared meanings in a personal way, creating *new semiotic sets* which organize and (re)structure her personal path in life, knitting past and future in the present (Mattos and Chaves 2011; Zittoun 2012). In this way, as they face significant ruptures, young people semiotically construct and reconstruct themselves, shape and reshape their life trajectories (Mattos and Chaves 2011; Zittoun et al. 2012). Although Zittoun and colleagues bring to light relevant contributions related to youth transitions, it is important to understand the dynamics of *semiotic self-regulation over time* as well as its role *in creating new life trajectories or maintaining old ones*. And to consider more directly how transition processes may be linked to the overcoming of ambivalences in meaning-making, advancing an understanding of how transition are related to dialogicality in the self-system.

In contemporary urban cities, a young developing person increasingly becomes a participant in diversified spheres of experience, including not only those of family and school—where he/she has participated since childhood—but also work, religious groups and eventually youth collective groups—such as those associated with urban art or hip hop—within which he/she shares certain activities and a set of cultural values, beliefs and meanings about herself and the world. These multiple contexts structure certain possibilities and limitations to young people's development through a process of *canalization* of their life trajectories (Valsiner 1997). They orient and direct the person to certain developmental pathways characterized by meaning fields emerging in specific social and historical situations, creating a field of experience that is permeated by tensions and contradictions.

Canalization processes, therefore, are crossed by tension that may be explicit (i.e. in rituals, and other social activities) or implicit (tacit). Over time, as young people start to participate in more diverse spheres of experience, they negotiate old and new positions in a life space that is filled with tensions. While opposing and confronting old and new positions, the young person configures and reconfigures certain self versions that might come to have some continuity over time. These processes, however, are not very well studied, and more research is needed to explore how these tensions are overcome in the flow of young people's everyday experience. Also, and more deeply, it is necessary to investigate how these changes are translated ontogenetically, fostering self-continuity as well as transformations across time.

Youth transitions can be understood along the same lines as the processes leading people to search for *self* continuity after multiple changes emerging as they participate in diverse spheres of experience (i.e. different contexts or domains of experience in which the person particpates, for example, home, school, work, etc.) (Zittoun and Grossen 2012). These processes, canalized by possibilities and affordances present in the sociocultural field, are characterized by building new *I-positions* and or *meta-positions* (or maintaining older ones) that orient people's actions towards the future. The idea that we want to put forth here is that in order to understand youth transition processes one must take into consideration not only *dialogical inter-relations between positions and counterpositions* that orient the developing person towards the future, but also one's *movement among different spheres of experience* and *among different levels of organization of experience* (*microgenetic, mesogenetic,* and

ontogenetic are *mutually related levels of experiencing*).[1] These processes might be more prominent during times when the young person confronts new spheres of experience that challenge previous self-configurations of dominant positions developed over time in the family or at school—their most prevalent spheres of experience during childhood. Therefore, it seems that a *significant movement of boundary crossing takes place here, at this window of development in which the young person advances his pilgrimage into the unknown worlds of complex social institutions*. Such a conception may contribute to a dynamic understanding of youth transition processes, helping analyze subjective configurations emerging during the process of development, as well as to explore young people's dialogical positioning and repositioning across time and in different spheres of experience.

Following this line of reasoning, I suggest that *youth transitions involve a process of self-positioning and repositioning in which the person seeks to develop new meanings of himself and the world as she participates in increasingly diverse spheres of life presented by her social and historical context.* This process brings ambivalence and tensions between I-positions, demanding reconfigurations in the self-system. Therefore, youth transitions imply a movement of searching for self-continuity after changes, through semiotic mediational meaning construction. It involves searching for specific forms of *semiotic regulation* and *temporal reorganization of the self system*. In youth transitions certain objects (Zittoun 2006b) as well as significant others may act as catalyzing agents that introduce multivocality to the self-system, increasing its dialogicality, and fostering development. However, not all processes of self-regulation may foster development. There are circumstances when self-regulation may bring rigidity into the system, creating a barrier for further development.

As highlighted by Cabell (2010), semiotic regulation operated by promoting as well as inhibiting developmental processes. Promoter signs (Valsiner 2004) are generalized meanings of field-like form that orient the process of meaning-making towards, and thus preparing for, the anticipated future. They allow for the person to constantly create meanings before it might be needed, orienting herself towards the anticipated future, and thus preparing him or herself for it. While several studies have already been dedicated to the investigation of self-regulation through promotion processes, much less research has been developed to explore self-regulation leading to inhibiting processes. And this study will seek to advance our understanding of such issues.

As suggested by research with young Brazilian apprentices (Mattos and Chaves 2010), *dialogical encounters with significant others located in diverse spheres of life become progressively internalized, guiding as well as legitimizing the emergence of* **promoter signs** *or* **meta-positions** *that orient youth developmental movement in a certain direction.* Catalyzing processes are capable of producing emerging

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[1] *Microgenetic, mesogenetic*, and *ontogenetic* are mutually related levels of experiencing. The *microgenetic* level relates to the immediate living experience, occurring as the person faces the ever-new next time moment the sequence of irreversible time; *mesogenetic* level refers to relatively repetitive or recurrent situated activity frames or settings (i.e. going to school, going to work, taking a shower, eating lunch in a table with family members) that canalize subjective experiencing by setting up a range of possible forms for such experiencing to take place; *ontogenetic* level correspond to experiences that are transformed into relatively more stable meanings over time and start to guide the person within her life course (Valsiner 2007).

differentiation (Cabell 2010) at *bifurcation points* in the person's developmental trajectory. Through catalyzing processes, specific *signs* can emerge in the landscape of the self and may act as *promoters* or *inhibitors* of development (Backstead et al. 2009; Valsiner and Cabell 2012). On the one hand, when the young person faces discontinuity in her self-relations with the social world, *promoter signs* will allow her to distance herself from the here-and-now experience, and build meaning bridges between past and future, and/or between different spheres of experience, allowing the emergence of a new life trajectory that brings self-continuity across time and space. On the other hand, *inhibitor signs* will block or make difficult the emergence of alternative meanings that could be actualized. However, the role of catalytic processes in promoting or inhibiting youth transitions needs to be clarified.

In terms of *dialogical self theory*, the landscape of the self is permeated by power relations between different I-position, reflecting a complex interplay among several voices (Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 2003). In this sense, some positions may become dominant and neutralize or subordinate others. As a consequence, *a dominant position may suppress some voices or inhibit their circulation or emergence, blocking the construction of some meanings and/or facilitating others* (Ribeiro and Gonçalves 2011). In the same way, meta-positions may emerge and integrate *past* and *present* self-positions (Cunha et al. 2011), as well as positions located in different spheres of experience (Zittoun et al. 2012). For instance, a meta-position emerging in the religious sphere may integrate self-positions from the work and family spheres (Mattos and Chaves 2011).

Valsiner (2005) suggests that developmental transitions involve the passage from a certain configuration of self-positions to a new one. He also points out that the dialogical self *"operates at the border of what is already developed and what might develop in a near future"* (p. 200). Cunha and Gonçalves (2009) also consider the *self* as a dynamic trajectory of multivocal self-positionings and re-positionings in the irreversible flux of experience. In line with these perspectives, we propose to look at youth transitions through the movement of boundary crossing among diverse spheres of experience and across time. Our focus relies on analyzing processes of *rupture-transition*—and specifically on *tensions emerging at specific bifurcation points*—as a window for understanding change within the dialogical self of transitioning youth.

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 significant rupture, (for example, when she enters the world of work), dominant I-positions may not respond to the changes emerging in her spheres of experience and new positions and meanings have to be created to face new situations. Specifically, in this paper, we will elaborate on youth transitions occurring after ruptures that appear when a young person enters a new sphere of life (i.e., work) and show how he navigates between old and new meaning fields, trying to overcome uncertainty, but is unable to build a new perspective of himself and his future—a process we believe is related with *the emergence of strong inhibitor signs to overcome ambivalence, leading to a rigidity in the self-system and the inability to build bridges between the past and future through promoter signs*.

We decided to 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 movement of *overcoming these tensions through semiotic mediation*. We suggest that the emergence of new positions via catalyzing processes can be *blocked* or *inhibited* by the action of *strong inhibitor signs*. Our aim is to show how *microgenetic processes* of self-regulation that occur in specific moments of rupture in a developmental trajectory may *inhibit* the emergence of novelty and the shaping of alternative trajectories in a longitudinal perspective. It is necessary, however, to make explicit that we are not dealing with experiences as they occur, but with reconstructed experiences that were internalized into the self-system, and subsequently externalized though the narrative process. Thus, our analysis departs from the idea that it is the person's (re) construction of experiences that drives change, rather than experiences as they happened. Therefore, we sought to elaborate on how a young person constructs and negotiates his/her *self configurations* while shaping his/her future, making explicit the mechanisms through which a significant rupture—such as entering the world of work—resonates in his/her self-system, and activates a process of *maintenance of problematic patterns of action, thinking and feeling* that may lead to *rigidity in self configuration over time*.

Method

The present study 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 in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. During the first round of data collection, the youth 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 Nelson, and focus on his experiences between 15 and 21 years of age. This particular case study was chosen among others in our sample because it shows the unfolding of *problematic patterns of action, thinking and feeling* that progressively leads to a *rigid self configuration*.

Interviews took place at the NGO headquarters and lasted about two hours. Data were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. Primary themes explored during the interviews were: significant changes and challenges experienced, work experience and family relations, and educational experiences. The present analysis focuses primarily on youth relations in the dimensions of family and work—because these are significant spheres of experience established in literature concerning Brazilian youth at this age range (Dayrell 2010; Sarti 2004). The case exemplifies *the dialogical semiotic approach to youth transitions*, emphasizing self-configuration strategies and negotiations of self-positions in different spheres of experience and across time. Following the presentation of the case, we will articulate the analysis with theoretical perspectives.

Case Example

Nelson's Case Synopsis in 2 Moments

Nelson is an afro-descendent young man who lives with his parents and siblings (two brothers and a sister) in a large inner-city poor neighborhood located on the outskirts

of the city of Salvador. His father is an auto mechanic in an urban bus company and his mother also works at the same company in general cleaning services. Before entering the NGO-run apprentice program, Nelson had no previous paid work experience. When he began participating in the program, he was 16 years old, in his 1st year of high school and was hired as an apprentice at the same company at which his parents worked.

First Moment: "It was too much workload for just one person"

In the first interview, Nelson had just turned 18 and told us about the rupture he had faced more and less a year before when he began to work as an apprentice at the company. His father sought this opportunity for Nelson in the company where he himself worked, because the company was offering placements as apprentices for employee's children. Nelson was taken a bit by surprise when his father one day woke him up saying *"Hurry, get up! You have to go get a work card! You are going to be an apprentice in the company where I work."* He was 16 years old and spent most of his time either at home or school or playing with his schoolmates. At the beginning of the program, he spent four month in training at the NGO, and later, started to work in the administrative department of the bus company. He thought this was a turning point in his life, because when he arrived at the company he realized he was not prepared for the kind of task he had to perform, a very heavy routine in the penalties department. And he couldn't count on his co-workers to help him.

When he arrived at the company, much the same way as other apprentices in our study, Nelson reported he *"sat there with nothing to do, and [just observed] people doing everything,"* and thought *"there was nobody [with] patience to help"* him find out about his activities and tasks. But soon, he started to work in the penalties department, with a lot of demanding tasks, and with only one formal employee to take care of everything. Nelson could not count much on him to support his own work, because he was extremely busy. It was Diana—an employee from another department—who explained to Nelson what he had to do, and followed his accomplishments as he began to take care of *"all fines that came to the company."* When talking about the kind of activity he was engaged in at the time, he explained:

> I dealt with all the fines that were coming to the company. There was an employee in my department that was taking care of the fines [before I arrived], but then he [started to] do other things, and I became responsible for dealing with all fines during the time I worked as an apprentice in the company. When a bus driver crossed a red light, my task was to call him, and try to enter into an agreement with him about payment of the fine. The driver had to pay [the amount due] to the company, and then the company paid the corresponding amount [to the State Transit Department]. This was the kind of negotiation I had to do. I was responsible for that.

Nelson felt uneasy and considered his tasks *"a very big challenge,"* even a *"burden"*, because *"thousands of fines were there to negotiate with the company drivers"* and he always had *"a tight schedule to do everything."* He emphasized that, in his department, *"everything had to be solved on a tight schedule"*. Therefore, besides the high degree of responsibility, Nelson had to negotiate with the bus drivers,

and try to convince them to pay for the fines, being careful not to extrapolate the schedule for payment. And he felt *"it was too much workload for just one person."*

Concerning his relationship with co-workers, Nelson didn't like the way he was treated, and had a negative outlook on his colleagues and work environment in general. He felt very lonely and isolated, since he had no support to perform his activities. He reflected that people didn't collaborate much with him, and thought that they were even *mean* to him, as *"they knew [his] weaknesses, and they didn't help, and wanted to make [him] fail."* He thought he has been "*naïve*," because he'd "*trusted people too much*" in his routine, thinking that *"everyone was good,"* and *"wouldn't cause harm"* to him. But he felt disappointed with his colleagues, because they *"knew how demanding [his] job was and what were his weaknesses, but they didn't help [him] or warn [him]."* Therefore, he felt that, although *"[he] trusted people, they were not worthy of the trust [he] gave them."* Therefore, his overall affect in the workplace had been a feeling of *distrust*, as well as of *loneliness* and *isolation*.

When he talked about his relationship with Diana, Nelson acknowledged that she was the only person who gave him support, and monitored his work. He thought sometimes she was helpful, but other times she had been "*too harsh*" on him, and he "*got upset when she complained about his difficulty in finishing [his] tasks on time.*" He explained that sometimes he left some tasks for the next day, but doing so was even more complicated because he had to keep a tight schedule. Otherwise, fines would accumulate and the company would end up paying more and put the blame on him. Therefore, sometimes he had to work until late in the evening to avoid a work overload the next day.

Talking more about how he felt, Nelson reflected:

> I had to take too many responsibilities for the tasks I had to accomplish, and there was a moment when I was feeling very overwhelmed by my tasks. […] Sometimes I worried about things that were running out of time. And I received a 'sermon'[2] every time I was running late with my tasks. So, when I went home, I was very worried and concerned. Sometimes I came home very stressed out, and told my mother that I didn't want to work there anymore. There was a moment I thought I was not fit for that job.

With the passage of time, however, Nelson created a work routine and procedures for himself, and felt he had *"invented new ways of doing things"* that didn't exist before his arrival. Therefore, he thought that "*people started to **rely** more on [him], knowing that [he] would complete [his] tasks.*" Nelson started to believe more in himself, to believe that he *"could accomplish everything,"* and feel as if he were already an "*employee of the company.*" He thought that, although he had *"started as an **apprentice** in the company,"* he *"worked as an **employee**,"* with the same responsibilities and accomplishments of other employees.

However, near the end of the apprenticeship contract, the company told Nelson that he would not be hired as an employee because he was under the age of 18 (he was 17), and had to take military draft.[3] By this time, the company decided to hire a person to replace Nelson in his tasks, and to take on a new function that was created

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[2] By "sermon" he means 'lecture' about his wrong doings.
[3] Military enlisting is a duty for all males of 18 years old in Brasil.

in the department. At this point, Nelson thought he did not *"seem like an **apprentice** anymore, [he] looked like a real **company employee**,"* and thought *"what a paradise to work there!"* Therefore, when the time came and he had to leave the company, he became *"very sad, (…) and even cried."*

When talking about his expectations for the future, Nelson reflected he *"hoped to **go back to work** there, at **the same company**,"* and that people made him confident that he could *"**return** one day."* He reflected this company gave *"great opportunities to grow."* But he also said that his *"opinion was frequently changing,"* and he was *"a little confused"* about the goals he wanted to pursue. He thought that if he could return to the transportation company, *"depending on what [he] would do there, [he] would try to pursue a profession."*

Elaborating more about what he wanted to do, Nelson regretted that he couldn't *"save some of the money [he] earned"* as an apprentice, because he would like to take a course to earn better educational credentials. He wanted to continue his education, but all the money he had earned he spent on consumer goods and going to the gym. He spent his money on things his parents couldn't give him. But he thought "*when [he] had the opportunity, [he] didn't think much about it. [He] didn't **invest in [him]self**, in things that would benefit [his] future."* Therefore, he was now looking for a job, and thought that anything would be good for him.

Second Moment: "My attitude makes me go backwards"

When Nelson was 20 years old, he told us about another relevant change in his life, his *transition to a new job* where has been working for over a year. After spending some time unemployed and doing activities with no significant pay (i.e. precarious jobs—such as working as a waiter), Nelson started to work in small bookshop in his neighborhood, where he performed multiple tasks such as clerk, cashier, and stock controller. When talking about changes in his work life, Nelson reflected that he progressively became more aware of his responsibilities, that now he had to take responsibility for his own mistakes, as well as for his successes.

Regarding his overall feelings, Nelson reported he became more critical of people's attitudes and less optimistic for himself and for the country. He thought he had finally learned what constitutes a work environment, and he *"didn't like what [he] saw."* He was very disappointed at the bookshop, not only with the company, but also with his owners and colleagues. He explained that the company had a lot of irregularities in the payment of taxes and salaries of its employees. Something else that bothered him very much was the fact that he had been hired as a *clerk* when—in fact—he was performing several other tasks in the company. He felt he deserved recognition such as a higher salary or promotion.

Talking about what he was doing at the bookshop, Nelson explained that there was a moment when he *"was under **a lot of pressure**,"* because he *"took on **too much responsibility**,"* in deciding to help his boss to open another store in nearby neighborhood. He reflected that he *"was the person [at the bookshop] most **concerned** about the opening of the new store."* Nelson asked what needed doing, and his boss told him that he needed to hire an electrician, a carpenter and a plumber. Then, with his Boss's permission, Nelson took upon himself the hiring of these workers and supervising of their contracts and activities.

As Nelson recollected, many of his co-workers at that time "***questioned [his] ability***" to take over that level of responsibility, and "***used to make fun of [him].***" But, Nelson disregarded their jokes and kept doing what was necessary to open the new shop even in the absence of his Boss—who was travelling. He hired the workers and put everything in place for the opening of the bookshop. He explained that he "*started to work from Sunday to Sunday nonstop, without clearances,*" and he "*left the construction site only at 10pm everyday,*" because he "***wanted to do it right.***" Sometimes he got very worried that something could go wrong and his Boss "*would cut his head off.*" When the store opened, his Boss acknowledged that he had done well, and decided to put Nelson to run the new shop. But he didn't promote him, and he continued formally hired as "clerk" in the old shop. He started to work every day in the new shop, but when he was needed at the old shop, he had to run there and do whatever was required (financial records in the computer, accounting, cashier, etc.). He started to take on more and more responsibilities, going back and forth between the stores, and spending several hours on the computer. He couldn't stand the burdensome workload, which he regarded as "*too much information to deal with.*"

With work accumulating and responsibilities piling up, Nelson felt tremendous pressure and escalating anxiety. He developed symptoms of a nervous breakdown, like *shaking all over his body* upon arriving home, and *insomnia*. He feared things would go wrong, and didn't want to talk to anyone, including family. Sometimes on weekends, he would go to a beach alone, and *forgot the passing time*. Sometimes at work he ran to the stockroom and *cried*, desperate because he couldn't "*deal with all that responsibility.*" His mother became worried about his health and took him to a psychologist who acknowledged he was sick and needed to rest at home for a week.

Reflecting on all that happened, Nelson believed that "*for some time he didn't want to continue in this new job,*" because he felt terribly upset and disappointed with the company. He was "*not having a good experience there,*" and found it "*really hard to continue working there.*" He was still looking for a better job, but found it "*very difficult to get **what [he] really wanted,***" as he explained:

> This is not what I want for my life. I want [to work in] a company where I have a higher job placement, where I can keep growing. My dream at the moment is *to work in a big company*. I have *to go back to the bus company* where my family works.[4]

He kept repeating that he "*dreamt of an opportunity to work in a large company, because it will provide [him] an opportunity to grow.*" Reflecting on his experience some time ago as an apprentice in the bus company, he realized that he had really been under a lot of pressure there, but that he "***loved to work there**, to have that kind of job with fines, and to **work under a tight schedule**.*" When Nelson compared that apprentice job with the one he now had at the bookshop, he thought, "*Oh My God, I didn't realize I was in paradise at the transportation company!*" He thought that, even tired, stressed out, and feeling exhausted by the end of the day (he repeated several times), he "*missed that time a lot.*"

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[4] Both of his parents and his older brother work at the bus transportation company.

Nelson began looking for another job, in a big company where he could earn more money. But he was feeling very sad lately, because his financial problems had worsened. He still couldn't save any money, and his debts were escalating, including several from credit cards. He was spending more because he was more anxious. As a result, he couldn't take any course he wanted, not even for his driver's license. His mother tried to help him pay his debts, and lent him some money to pay part of the credit card. But instead of paying his debts, Nelson spent the money, and made even more debts. As his debts accumulated, he felt desperate, and the only solution he could point out was:

> In order to build a new life in terms of work, in terms of my future, *I have to change my job*, I have to grow, I have to conquer new job functions, and *I have to work in a big company*, because this small company does not satisfy me.

Once again, Nelson regretted the fact that he could not save money to take courses to become more qualified for a better job. Much the same way he did at the time of the first interview, he still didn't think much about the future, and spent all his money on consumer goods—goods he really didn't need. He didn't know how to manage his finances, and all his money vanished in debts. As he explained, *"much of this buying [was] caused by psychological pressure,"* because he *"wasn't happy at the company"* where he worked.

Nelson reflected that he wanted *"everything to come fast."* And further explained that he didn't seem to be *"moving forward,"* because his *"attitudes made [him] go backwards,"* keeping him from getting what he wanted. He thought he acted as if he could *foresee* or *predict* his future by magic, instead of constructing *plans* for his future. He also admitted: *"I fear what I **foresee** will fail to happen."*

Recalling his childhood, Nelson remembered when he used to help his mother work on the streets. His mother is a role model to him because she had to abandon school in the 7th grade and worked hard peddling in the streets when her children were young. But later, she continued her studies and today she works at the same transportation company as her husband, and where Nelson had apprenticed. About this experience, he recalls:

> I always regarded my *mother as a mirror*. She always worked, she was always in the streets, selling this and that, and I was always with her, I used to push her cart (on the street.) I was always there *because I admired her*, I *still do*. […] She used to say 'I'll get everything I want.' *She is just like me*, but I spend a lot more money than she does. *She is controlled*. […].

Therefore, Nelson had a strong identification with his mother since childhood. She used to be a role model for his actions, and he had a strong emotional bond to her.

Another significant recollection Nelson had at the time of this interview was about his adolescent friendships with classmates. He seemed to regret that he'd lost these friends upon entering the apprentice program. At the time his father got him into the program, he had group of close friends at school that he regarded as *"brothers and sisters,"* because they had a very strong link, and they spent entire days together. But the program was a significant change in his life, and he had to abandon the group, because he didn't have time anymore. He recalled that he didn't have much responsibility before that. It was a time of *"rebellion"* against rules—especially school

rules. They skipped classes and went to the beach to play guitar the whole afternoon. Although he regarded the apprentice program as a great opportunity, he considered the loss of his friends a significant rupture, because he had expected them to be there for all his life. About this experience, Nelson recalled:

> At that time I didn't have responsibility for anything, I came back home at the time I wanted. I was the youngest of my group, and everybody was a rebel, everybody used to skip classes. That was my time of rebellion, and everything changed so suddenly…I had to get in line, to do everything right.

Therefore, Nelson seemed to regard his entrance into the program as a significant rupture in his lifestyle, as something unexpected, and—although he didn't seem very aware of it—that recollection came at the time he was facing another significant rupture—his nervous breakdown due to work overload at the bookshop, and the escalation of his debts (Table 1).

Table 1 Synthesis of emerging ruptures and tensions between I-positions in Nelson's self-system

Emerging Ruptures	Spheres of Experience	Main Tensions between I-Positions and Overcoming Strategies	Description
1st Interview:			
Initial Ruptures: Entrance in the world of work as apprentice; Rupture with school friends; academic under-achievement.	Work	Apprentice X Unskilled-Youth *Without-space-there Isolated*	Ambivalences at the work sphere: accepting youth apprentices vs. disqualifying them. ***Mutual-in-feeding*** between main positions, maintenance of opposing voices. After sometime, the inhibitor sign Company Employee emerges to regulate his relations with the environment
		1st. Cycle of Inhibitor Sign*: Emergence of inhibitor sign* ***Company-Employee***	
	Family	*Dependent-son* ***X Money-spender***	Ambivalence in the family: being taken care of and "accepted" by his parents, and supported by them vs. spending all he money he earned without saving or contributing to household expenses
	School	*Rebellious-Student (latent I-position) X Responsible-student*	Ambivalence at school: being a rebel who skipped classes with friends to go to the beach (latent I-position—revealed only later) vs. being a responsible student who has to arrive in class on time after work

Table 1 (continued)

Emerging Ruptures	Spheres of Experience	Main Tensions between I-Positions and Overcoming Strategies	Description
2nd Interview:			
Escalation of ruptures: Entrance into a new work environment; too much responsibility at work; escalation of debts; escalation of anxiety and bodilyy symptoms (stress syndrome).	Work	**_Rigidity Cycle: Mutual-in-feeding + Generalized negative-affective-field_** _Distrust_ = **_Emerging inhibitor signs_**: _Company-Employee_ (inhibits the emergence of alternative meanings at the workplace)	Encounters with others at the workplace tend to be overtaken by dominant negative generalized feeling of _distrust_ and _isolation_. _Nelson_ takes on too much responsibility. Re-emergence of position as **_Company-Employee_** that acts as _inhibitor_ for possible alternative future positions, and becomes a _barrier_ for the process of integration and/or synthesis in the self-system.
	Family	**_Rejected position_**: _Clerk_ Return of: _Unskilled youth_ Maintenance of: _Dependent-Son + Debtor_	In the family sphere debts with credit cards escalate and he feels desperate. Entrapment in _illusions_ and _magical solutions_.

Results and Discussion

Nelson's trajectory shows how the process of self-regulation can sometimes bring a form of _rigid stability_ into the self-system, by the emergence of _semiotic barriers_ that are difficult to overcome, and _inhibit_ or _block_ further development. His life experience highlights _the conditions under which semiotic regulation may lead to the creation of a cycle of rigid meanings,_ in a context inclusive manner. It shows how tensions among ambivalent positions within the self-system may escalate across time, leading to the emergence of an inhibitor sign that blocks the creation of alternative meanings, and later may bring rigidity to the person's way of thinking, acting and feeling. Here we will call that pattern a "_cycle of inhibition of alternative meanings,_" that later—in longitudinal time—becomes a _trajectory of rigid meaning construction and maintenance_.

To understand the process of semiotic regulation leading to the inhibition of emergence of alternative meanings, we will focus on two significant bifurcation points in Nelson's trajectory, and look for the necessary _conditions for semiotic regulation_—and more specifically _inhibition_—to occur, leading to a particular pattern of development.

The first bifurcation point emerges when _Nelson_ entered the world of work as an apprentice, and the second involves the acquisition of a new job function and

followed by escalation of ruptures. Family and school life—especially leisure activities he engages in with friends from school—were at that time the *central spheres* of *Nelson's* life experience, around which his self-system was organized. Therefore, his self-dynamics was configured around two main positions: ***Dependent-Son*** and ***Rebellious-Student***.

Nelson's dominant I-position—***Dependent-Son***—emerges out of his dialogical exchanges in his family, especially in dialogues with his *mother*, but with his *father* as well. This I-position creates a meaning field that reflects how Nelson experienced the family as a sphere of close proximity and bonds among people, where everyone cares for others and worries about their wellbeing. In this sense, the ***Dependent-son*** I-position voices how Nelson counted on his family for help and support in times of need, and that parents should act as supporters of children's needs. It also reflects a value system of an adolescent conforming to the opinions and orientations of his parents. Nelson's ***mother*** has a prominence in his self-system, appearing to be the most significant family figure in his inner life, as can be seen by his enduring identification with her in his recollections from childhood.

His father also acts as a significant other that is present in many of his inner dialogues as someone who guides his opinions and actions:

> I talk a lot with my father, and when I was desperate, he said, "You have to leave these things in God's hands and let go".

In the school sphere, a latent position—that is not fully revealed until our second encounter with him—was the ***Rebellious-Student***, voicing the moments of *freedom* and *lack of responsibilities* in Nelson's adolescent life, prior to his entrance in the apprentice program. Nelson's recollections show that his entrance in the world of work was somehow unexpected, and he had to abandon the leisurely life he'd had before with friends. Recalling his relationship with his friends at the time, Nelson reflected that:

> I had many friendships that were significant to me [at that time]. Then when my father came here… *They were my friends and I was with them every day*…I felt as if they were my brothers and sisters, *we had such a strong link… Then when suddenly*—on a "beautiful" (sic ironically) evening—*my father called me*, then said: 'Go run to take a picture!' [to get the work license] […] *Then it was really a significant change in my life*…because I was all day in the company of my friends, and *I left them*.

When Nelson started working as an apprentice, we see several possible *tensions emerging* in his self-system. On one level, he confronts the ambivalent discourses prevailing at the workplace that tend, on the one hand, to *exclude* young people from the work sphere as *"inexperienced"* or *"unskilled,"* and, on the other hand, to *include* them by sometimes giving an opportunity to *prove* themselves as competent, giving them tasks that are regarded as *challenges*. Therefore, Nelson feels at the same time challenged and devalued in his work environment, oscillating between positions of ***Apprentice (skilled) X Unskilled-Youth***, for on the one hand people seem not to care much about his presence, and on the other hand gave him tasks above his level of previous qualification and experience without offering much support.

Nelson's initial positions as **Dependent-Son** and **Rebellious-Student** don't help him very much in dealing positively with these ambivalent discourses, as they don't seem to contribute resources in his new environment. On the contrary, these initial positions bring even more tensions to the system. As the **Dependent-Son** is confronted by the **Money-Spender** in the family sphere, and the **Rebellious-Student** enters into confrontations with the **Responsible-Student** at the school sphere, these interchanges contribute to the escalation of anxiety and to the emergence of a *hyper-generalized affective field of distrust* (i. e. an affective state in which a feeling emerges and overwhelms the person's whole experience, without the possibility to identify the source of the feeling).[5]

In the work environment, the opposing positions emerging out of dialogical encounters with significant others—**Apprentice (skilled) x Unskilled (devalued)-Youth**—reflect Nelson's struggle to fit in, to find a place there, and to be recognized and accepted. But his emerging feelings of *"disqualification"* (resulting from the combination of *unskilled* and *devalued*), and of being *"underprepared"* to perform his tasks prevail.

At the family sphere, some ambivalence also emerges between the dominant position **Dependent-Son** and an emerging position **Money-Spender** that **Nelson** developed after beginning the apprentice program. These two positions are somehow contradictory because, as a **Dependent-Son** Nelson is *taken care of* and *accepted* by his parents, as well as *supported* by them, but as a **Money-Spender** he might have used the money he earned to get some autonomy and do things his parents couldn't afford (for instance, buying new clothes or going to the gym). However, by spending *all* the money he earned as an apprentice—without saving anything for his future needs or for household expenses—he would end up putting himself in a position of even more dependency on his parents in the future.

In the school context, Nelson had a *latent position* that would only emerge later in recollections he makes in our second interview—the **Rebellious-Student**. At the time of the first interview, however, he reported difficulties in adjusting his new work schedule to school activities, and highlighted that his academic performance declined significantly after he started to work (a common pattern presented among other apprentices) (Mattos 2008; Mattos and Chaves 2010). Dialogical interchanges reflecting ambivalences between the position of **Rebellious-Student** and of **Responsible-Student** are intensified.

A close analysis of what happens with Nelson in the work sphere with the passage of time allows for an understanding of the way he deals with these ambivalences. It is necessary to acknowledge that Nelson finds neither internal resources nor external help among his co-workers to deal with these tensions, and we can see that his initial *negative outlook* on the workplace—reflected in feeling excluded and isolated—rapidly grows into a *hyper-generalyzed feeling of **distrust***. Nelson emphasized that no one seemed to offer *support* or be *trustful*, and no one seemed to demonstrate *confidence* in his ability to perform. These feelings act as a *generalized negative*

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[5] The person's field of experience becomes pervaded by a positive or negative feeling (for example, a feeling of love, compassion, or disgust, distrust, fear, etc.) that starts to organize and regulate her actions and thinking, without the possibility to specify the origin of that feeling. For example: the person becomes frightened and refrains from going for a walk on the street yet she is unable to specify the source of that feeling.

affective-meaning field that *blocks* the emergence of alternative voices that could bring a positive value to his relationships.

Initially, ambivalences rise through his relations with others (co-workers)—exemplified by Nelson's dialogues with his colleague Diana, who supervised his work. On the one hand, he seems to recognize her support was important to the development of his tasks, but on the other, he doesn't assign a positive value to her comments. Nelson used two negative metaphors to indicate how he interpreted Diana's comments: he thought sometimes she was *"pressing"* him or *"giving a sermon"*[6] to him. For every time Diana tried to help Nelson and pointed to something he could change and do better, Nelson felt she was being too critical of him. These perceptions reflect Nelson's resistance to acknowledge and accept her support. But, in his recollections of interchanges with Diana, he also acknowledged her help as important for him. These interchanges show that Nelson initially was adopting a *mutual-in-feeding strategy* (Valsiner 2002) to overcome tensions emerging the workplace.

However, this initial movement of *alternating between (opposing) positions of trust<>distrust* does not lead to an overcoming of tensions—it doesn't allow for the elaboration of *new* meaning complexes. But instead, it results in an *escalation of the dominant negative view* he had of the workplace and of himself. After some time, Nelson felt sad, lonely and overwhelmed by work. He told his mother he couldn't stand that job anymore. He felt stressed out and exhausted when he got home, and couldn't even carry on with his academic activities. He felt he was taking on too much daily responsibility, and even wanted to discontinue his contract with the company. This escalation of the negative view corresponds to the *hyper-generalization of the affective field of distrust* and also to the emergence of *psychosomatic symptoms* such as insomnia and exhaustion.

However, instead of quitting his job as an apprentice, Nelson decided to *endure* and to make an effort to succeed at work. He developed a series of routines and procedures that brought him confidence in his own capacity to perform well (he developed new skills to perform his tasks). By this time, we can see that the *mutual-in-feeding* strategy was overcome by the emergence of the position **Company-Employee**. Reflecting on the events leading to the emergence of this new I-position, Nelson highlights:

> When I started to practice [my tasks] more, *everything* changed. I was feeling *already* like a *company employee*. I didn't even *remember* I was an *apprentice* anymore. I *worked just like* the other *employees* [overwhelmed by their work]. [...] There was a moment I felt too *overwhelmed* by my tasks.

This emerging position has three important characteristics that should be highlighted: first, it is *directly fed by the stream of contradictory discourses* he experiences at the workplace; second, it is described as *emerging out of magic, without a clear transformation path linking past positions* (for instance, the apprentice position) *to possible future ones*; and a third characteristic, *this position seems to remain "fix" and doesn't change when the context changes*. Let's examine each of these characteristics more closely. Firstly, the position of **Company-Employee** is directly fed by

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[6] In the same way as he would be "lectured" by a priest in church or by his parents when he would do something wrong.

contradictory discourses prevailing in the workplace. It relates to employee's work-load in the company, as well as to his level of *"competence"* (or "incompetence") in *"skills"* to perform job functions. It *does not provide Nelson enough distancing from the here-and-now* flux of work experience. Therefore, it cannot be regarded really as a *new* position. It is a *fusion of the already existing positions that had been mutually feeding each other*, and later become condensed. Secondly, although Nelson begins to acknowledge his ability to perform new functions and to take on his responsibilities, he *cannot make a clear distinction between the way he used to be in the past* (as apprentice or even as a student) *and how he sees himself now* (after his supposed transformation) into **Company-Employee**. He cannot explain his transition from **Apprentice** to **Company-Employee**, which seems to come about by *magic*. He cannot describe a clear *process* or *path* of transformation in the "qualities" of the former position (apprentice), bringing forth the new one (employee). And thirdly, the position of **Company-Employee** seems to remain *"fixed" (rigid)*, as a kind of *"illusion,"* because it doesn't reflect the changing circumstances in Nelson's environment (for instance, he keeps positioning himself as a **Company-Employee** even after being told he couldn't be hired as a *"real"* employee after the termination of his apprentice contract). Moreover, this position doesn't open an *imaginary space of new possibilities*—that would allow for productive or generative construction of future alternatives—but rather bring forth an *illusory fixed space*.

Therefore, we can see that meanings conveyed by the position of **Company-Employee**—instead of *promoting* the emergence of alternative future possibilities—may in fact contribute to their *inhibition*. Instead of building bridges between Nelson's past and future/alternative meanings, the regulatory role of this position brings more *rigidity* to the whole meaning making process. Along these lines, we suggest that this I-position may function as a **strong sign** in Nelson's self-system, because—as highlighted by Abbey (2012b)—it doesn't allow for a generative pre-adaptation either to the present context in which Nelson is participating, or to the uncertainty of his future. Along these lines, we believe that the nature of this **I-position Company-Employee** is of a *strong inhibitor sign*, since meanings directly associated with it (such as *stressful, worried* or *concerned* with the accomplishing of tasks) show a tendency to remain *"fixed"* over time, in an illusory *"frozen"* version of his past experience.

Figure 1 illustrates the creation of a *strong inhibitor sign* in *Nelson's* trajectory through the emergence in the present of a position—**Company-Employee** (D). This position functions as a *regulatory sign* that has the role of *inhibiting the emergence of alternative meanings to make sense of experiences* (of thinking, feeling and acting)—possible field of (**E**) {E1, E2, E3}—and creates an **obstacle** or a **barrier** for further transformations in Nelson's self-system. More specifically, at the first bifurcation point (corresponding to his entrance into the world of work), we can see that the emerging tensions in his life experience initially tended to be resolved using a strategy of *mutual-in-feeding*, of oscillations between "prepared/unprepared," "competent/incompetent," "apprentice/unskilled-youth" (A) X (B). But this strategy implied a *maximization of ambivalences* that becomes unbearable to maintain. Therefore, *mutual-in-feeding* was later followed by the overtaking of a *generalized affective-field of distrust* (C), at the workplace, and by the emergence of a sign—the **Company-Employee** (D)—with the *regulatory role* of *inhibiting* further
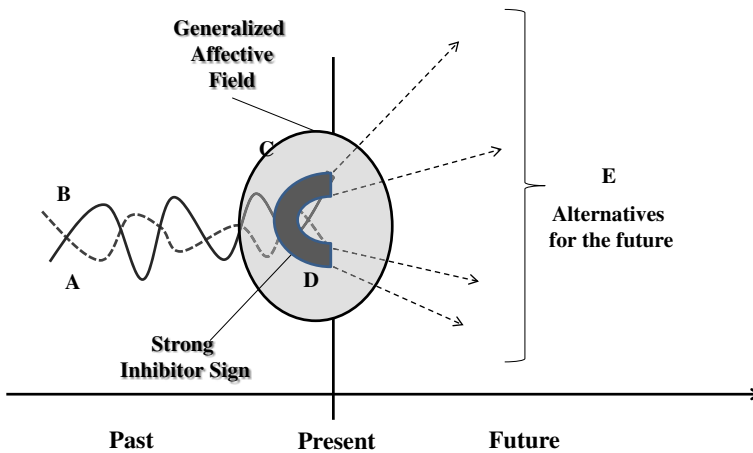
Fig. 1 Trajectory of creation of a strong inhibitor sign

transformations. When this *strong inhibitor sign* emerges, meanings tend to become *"frozen" in time and space*, creating an *obstacle* (or a *barrier*) to the emergence of alternative meanings of the future in Nelson's self-system (E). This process culminates when Nelson talks about his plans for the future, and only refers to his "*hope to return to the transportation company,*" highlighting that other aspects seemed *"confused"* and couldn't be anticipated.

It is important to note that cyclical movements between opposing meanings (or positions) in *mutual-in-feeding* may become intolerable, leading to an escalation of a *hyper-generalized affective fields* that will bring this initial pattern to a resolution in the form of a progressive *fusion of the tension field*, generating the *strong inhibitor sign*.

Later in Nelson's life trajectory, new ruptures emerged in his life experience bringing him to face a new bifurcation point. He is now working as a *clerk* at a small bookstore in his neighborhood. Entrance into this new work environment, however, didn't bring him much satisfaction. He still *maintains a hyper-generalized affective-feeling of **distrust*** reflected in a general negative outlook that orients much of his work experience, accompanied by a *generalized feeling of **regret*** emerging in episodes related to the escalation of debts and also in recurrent memories of his past. Now, *Nelson* reveals "*distrust*" not only towards his co-workers but also regarding the company itself and its owners. He reports that he is disappointed with the company (i.e. its owners) because of its financial irregularities related to payment of taxes and workers' wages, and he also thinks the owners are dishonest.

Nelson also repeatedly refers to the lack of *recognition* of his *competence* in the performance of his tasks, much in the same way he did at the bus company. He complains that he was hired as a *"clerk"*, but actually performs several other activities not recognized by his Boss or his co-workers. Therefore, he feels devalued and starts to reject his position as **Clerk**. He feels sad that he is *"**only a clerk**"* when he is actually performing tasks of stock controller, cashier and accounting assistant.

In search for recognition beyond his current job function, Nelson took on several extra responsibilities, extrapolating his formal clerk duties, assisting the shop owner in opening another bookstore. This movement brings an escalation of anxiety into his self-system, as well as emergence of psychosomatic symptoms, and culminates is a ***crisis of stress***.

In our second interview, it becomes clear that the inhibitor position as **Company-Employee** seems much more consolidated in Nelson's self-system, creating a barrier to his healthy adaptation to the work environment. Nelson expresses dissatisfaction with his job function as a **Clerk**—which he rejects—and starts a desperate search for recognition, turned into kind of determination to *prove* himself *capable*. As Nelson takes on more and more responsibilities, doing several tasks at the same time (i.e. supervising the construction of the new bookshop, acting as financial assistant, and cashier at the old shop) doing almost everything to get recognition, ambivalence escalates and reaches a point of becoming unbearable (Abbey 2012a, b), and he has a nervous breakdown. He becomes physically *exhausted*, *shaking* all over and having *attacks of panic of failure*, bursting into *tears* uncontrollably. At this point, his mother takes him to a psychologist, who acknowledges his need for rest.

In the family sphere, Nelson keeps operating mostly from the position of **Dependent-Son**—now complemented by the position of **Debtor**. This coalition of positions **Dependent-Son-Debtor** reflects an amplification of Nelson's condition of *dependency* that he still could not overcome. As suggested above, his former position as **Money-Spender**—who used *all* his money to get some autonomy by buying and doing things his parents couldn't afford—is amplified to a position as **Debtor**, as he accrued several credit card debts, without saving anything for future needs (such as a vocational course he could take) or for household expenses. The **Dependend-Son-Debtor** position puts Nelson in a state of even greater *vulnerability* and *dependency* on his parents, and is associated with the escalation of tensions and anxiety at the family sphere. Now, even working and earning his own money, Nelson needs financial support from his family to resolve his debts.

At this moment, there are also episodic returns to the position of **Unskilled-Youth** that Nelson first experienced when he began the apprentice program. This position emerges every time he talks about acting as **Dependent-Son-Debtor**. As a **Debtor**, he is very much *overtaken by a generalized feeling of regret*. He regrets the fact that he didn't save any money to use in some course that could afford him better work opportunities. He blames himself for not being able to save money, but at the same time he doesn't seem to be able to find a viable solution to this problem. Reflecting on this situation, Nelson says:

> I *regret* the fact that I didn't save some money, that I didn't use this money in some kind of course. I used all the money in consumer goods. But I *could have done that*, I *should have done that*. To this day I try to do a course that gives me another kind of qualification, but I cannot because I cannot save anything.

His mother even tried to help him, lending him money to pay his debts, but instead, he even accrued more debts, to a point that he became so desperate that his father gave him advice to put everything in *"the hands of God."* Therefore, we see over time the *recurrence of generalized negative feelings towards himself and the world and of negative self-evaluation*, and the *escalation of anxiety*. When thinking about possible solutions for his present condition or future perspectives, *Nelson* emphasizes that:

> What will give me *a new life* in my work environment is *changing jobs*. I feel that if I change my job, my life will change *completely*. *Everything* will be *left behind*, all I went through will be left behind. I'll have time to live, because

there is a difference between living and vegetating, and I'm *feeling like I've been vegetating lately.*

Explaining more about what this job change could mean, Nelson says:

I want [to work in] a company where I have a *higher job placement*, where I can keep *growing*. My *dream* at the moment is to work in a big company. *I have to go back to the bus company* where my family works.

All the time Nelson tries to find an alternative solution to his present condition, and foresee the life changes he wants to make, he returns to the same strong rigid sign of **Company-Employee** at the bus company—that seems to have become *"frozen"* in time and space, functioning as a semiotic barrier, enhancing the system rigidity. The emergence of alternative possibilities of being, of new self versions, was blocked, and all meanings were dragged into a kind of "*black hole*" that did not allow for the building of bridges between past and future positions in his self-system. The inhibitor sign—**Company-Employee**—accompanied by the hypergeneralized feelings of distrust and later of regret, have blocked the exploration of alternative meanings. Nelson's self-narrative becomes *entrapped* in a cycle that seems impossible to overcome by a new semiotic synthesis. And he falls into a **stress crisis**, as his body becomes the ultimate locus for change, through shivers, exhaustion, and uncontrollable crying.

What Does a Semiotic Operation with an Inhibitor Sign Looks Like?

Every time Nelson tries a **new meaning loop** as a way to overcome current ambivalences and reach for new meanings that could orient his trajectory, he ends up falling into a *"dense mass"* of fixed meanings put forth by the strong *inhibitor sign* of **Company-Employee**. Nelson couldn't build a *promoter sign* to allow for the emergence of a meaning bridge to integrate his past and future. Growing tensions in multiple spheres of experience are not overcome through the emergence of new flexible meanings. They find expression through *body symptoms (*in a *stress crisis)*.

Reflecting on the way he was feeling, Nelson believes that he leaves many things open, undone or incomplete: *"The things I try to do and I cannot finish…are things **left behind**."* He explains: *"I want to get things so fast, I get anxious, and I start to spend even more money in a way that makes me feel my attitudes pulling me backwards."* And he can't make plans for his future or establish goals, and feels he is *"vegetating"* on things *"left behind"* or not fully lived.

In his narrative, when pointing to the many things he leaves undone or is unable to complete, Nelson frequently frames his statements using the utterance construction "*as-it-could-have-been*" or "*as-it-should-have-been*" (e.g. "*I **could have saved** money to take a course*" or "***I should have** saved money*" and "*I **wish I could go back** to work at the bus company"*). By using this kind of time frame to construct his meanings, Nelson seems to reveal a wish to go back in time to a past that has been **left behind**, *abandoned*, that didn't really correspond to his *lived experiences*, but still haunts him like a ghost of himself, *"frozen"* in time and space. By recurrently referring to a time that was *left behind,* he seems to convey the only self-version in

which he seems to believe: an *inescapable "dream shadow" of himself*—that finds expression through the **Company-Employee** and that could only be reached by *magic*. Therefore, through the operation of the inhibitor sign, he conveys the idea that his only possible alternative *"future"* is a magical return to an unrealistic, "*might-have-been*" self-version left unlived in his *"past"* experience. Instead of constructing an alternative future version of himself, a *being-in-becoming* or a *coming-into-being* —as someone might do after the emergence of *promoter signs*—he brings forth a *"being-that-might-have-been,"* that pulls him into a *"black hole"* of a frozen time, to the abandoned, unlived experience of **Company-Employee**. And he is overwhelmed by a *generalized feeling of regret*, helpless in the face of uncertainty about the future.

What results from this semiotic regulation process—operated by the inhibitor sign **Company-Employee**—is therefore neither an *integration of personal historical time*, of past and future in the present (i.e. a meaning bridge that would frame the person's historicity), nor an *integration of personal life spaces* (i.e. the different spheres of experience). The outcome is a sort of *illusory* identification with a *"being-that-might-have-been"*—not with a *"being-in-becoming."* This *illusory identification* temporarily holds the self-system together and offers some sort of continuity, but is colored by moments of *regret* and *fear of failure* that may be externalized through body symptoms as well as in recurrent attempts to push the person into a frozen "dream shadow" of a "past" he left behind. And since this identification is merely *illusory*, an imminent possibility of fragmentation is always present and quite much latent in Nelson's trajectory.

From a *dialogical-semiotic approach to the self*, it is possible to understand the intricate tensions and interplay among Nelson's positions, as well as the emergence of a semiotic regulatory process through a strong sign that ***inhibits the emergence of flexible meanings***. In his attempt to overcome *ambivalences* emerging in central spheres of his life experience, he tries *new meaning loops—but the inhibitor sign blocks the catalytic synthesis of the process*. Instead, his self-system creates a protection against ambivalence and escalation of generalized negative feelings (i.e. distrust and regret), repeatedly turning into a "*dream-shadow-version-of-himself*", a *"being-that-might-have-been"* instead of a *"being-in-becoming"*—an illusion that he could *magically* become what he *"might-have-been"* in an abandoned past.

Therefore, what is taking place in this *new meaning loop* might be a process of self-regulation operated by an inhibitor sign that functions as a barrier to the generation of alternative possible future trajectories. By the action of a strong inhibitor sign —the **Company-Employee** position—that emerges and consolidates over time in the work sphere, Nelson's meaning construction is *"frozen"* in time and space. This *inhibitor sign* builds a trajectory of rigidity in the self-system.

The Unproductive Cycle of Rigid Meanings

As illustrated in Fig. 2, the *meaning loops* taking place at different *levels* of Nelson's experience brings his self-system to consolidate a specific type of sign—the strong inhibitor sign—emerging in the work sphere, and blocking further elaboration of higher meanings. As a consequence, the *promotion of alternative meanings* or even *integration of partial meanings* emerging at specific spheres of Nelson's life remains difficult to achieve. He is not able to overcome ambivalences, and the escalation of
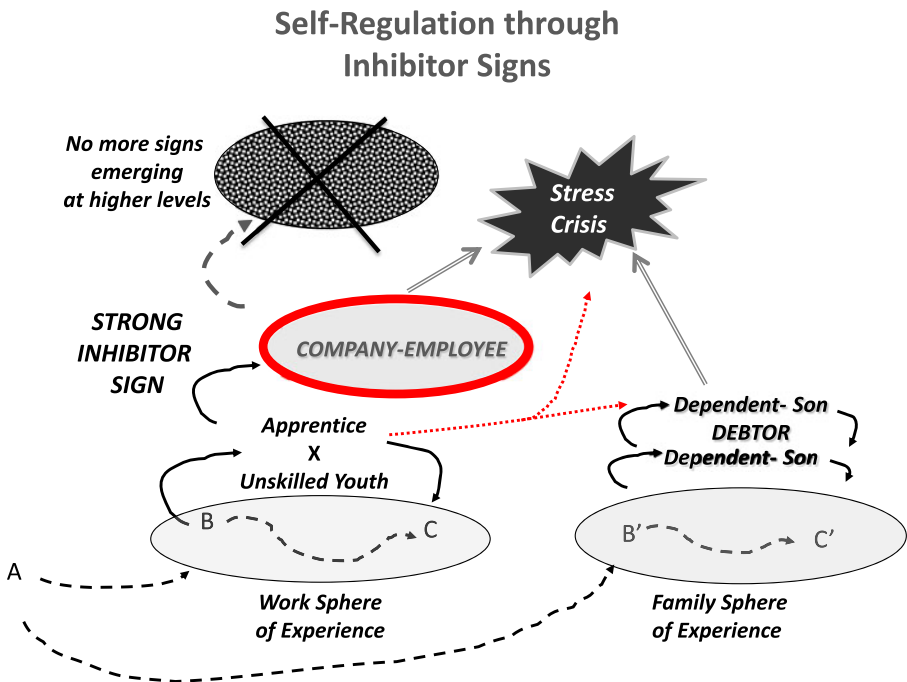
Self-Regulation through
Inhibitor Signs

Fig. 2 Self-Regulation through the strong inhibitor sign

hypergeneralized affective negative fields appears unavoidable. When ambivalences are maximized, they are expressed through body symptoms, and he falls into a stress crisis, as his body becomes the ultimate locus for the production of *semiosis*. The strong inhibitor sign—***Company-Employee***—that emerges out of *mutual-in-feeding* of dialectical discourses in the workplace becomes a "***black hole***," swallowing all alternative meanings that could bring out a productive pre-adaptation to the uncertainties of his future. Such a construction is possible because Nelson couldn't make a synthesis of his actualized and non-actualized past trajectories. Therefore, he cannot achieve historicity (Lyra and Valsiner 2011) through meaning-making, and in the future, fragmentation always remains possible.

As we see in Fig. 3, rigidity results from *meaning loops* that cannot bring out new *meta-positions* to operate in the self-system. After the first rupture, triggered by *mutual-in-feeding* of dialogical relations with significant others, the *inhibitor sign* is condensed around strong meanings and becomes prominent in the self-system. The whole process is surrounded by a *hypergeneralized feeling of distrust*. In the second rupture, regret colors most of Nelson's relations with the world. Development, or rather—continuity through rigidity—is not a peaceful, tautological movement. It results from *meaning loops* that are incapable of *interweaving various spheres of experience,* as well as *different time perspectives in a person's trajectory*. In Nelson's case, initial *mutual-in-feeding* turns into a *fusion of tensions* around the meaning of **Company-Employee** built in the work sphere.

With the passage of time, this ***inhibitor sign*** becomes even stronger—*"frozen" in time and space*—as it not only *blocks the emergence of new future alternatives*, but also *re-enacts the illusory "dream-shadow" version* of Nelson's self. What is

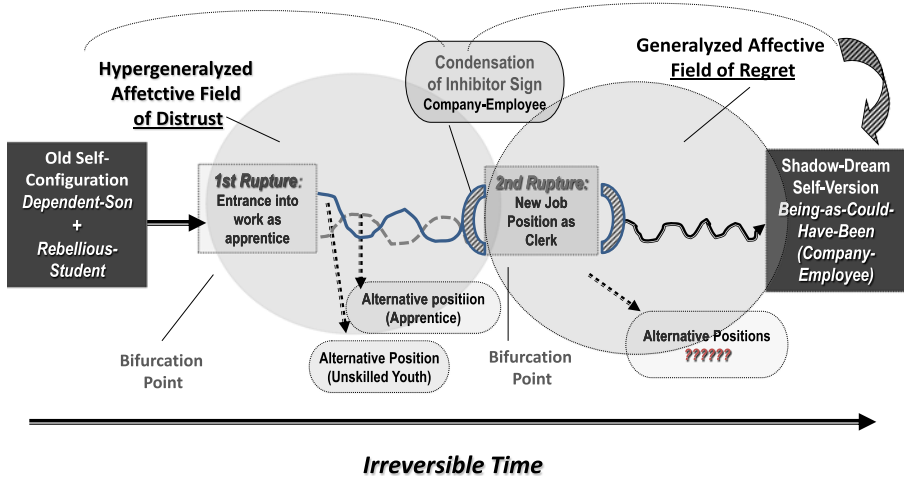# Trajectory of Rigid Meanings
in Nelson's Development

Fig. 3 Trajectory of rigid meanings in Nelson's development

amplified here is Nelson's negative affective field towards himself and the world. Nelson's initial self-version that operated before the first bifurcation point—did not undergo a significant transformation (in terms of catalytic synthesis). Instead, the *cycle of rigid meanings* around the "dream-shadow" version of the self allows for the maintenance of the *status quo ante*. On the one hand, Nelson *remains* even more *dependable* on his parents (***Dependent-Son***), because his vulnerability and dependency increase as a result of his financial debts. And, on the other hand, he *remains dissatisfied with his life*, and has a *critical outlook on his world*—much the same way he had as a *Rebellious-Student*. But *he is not able to use his critical perspective productively*, to build a positive self-version, integrating past and future perspectives, as his present doesn't represent an *abstract synopsis* or *synthesis* between *actualized and imagined* past experiences (Abbey and Valsiner 2004; Valsiner 2007).

His alternative past—the past that he has left behind—is turned into an *illusory* "*future*" alternative, and he wants to "re-enact" by *magic* what he left behind: a *"being-that-might-have-been"*. Therefore, movement in this meaning loop does not allow for the creation of an *abstract, imagined space of generative transformation*. The recurrent cycle of inhibition becomes a trajectory of rigid meanings, showing that sometimes ambivalences are maximized and cannot be overcome. Nelson builds a *strong inhibitor sign* that makes even more difficult the emergence of meanings at a higher level of generalization (i.e. at a level of symbolization of experience that rises above here-and-now specific situations),[7] as well as the construction of meaning bridges integrating past and future meanings.

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[7] People create abundant meanings to deal with life experience, and these meanings, loaded with feelings, become organized in different levels of symbolization/abstraction. Meanings at lower levels of symbolization are linked to specific here-and-now situations, and meanings at higher levels of symbolization are meanings that rise above the here-and-now specific situation and become generalized or hyper-generalized (Cabell and Valsiner 2011).

Final Remarks

In this paper, we advanced a *semiotic-dialogical-perspective of youth transitions*, and sought to contribute to the understanding of *self-regulatory processes through semiotic mediation.* We used a case study to illustrate the condition of self-regulation in which an *inhibitor sign is built out of mutual-in-feeding between alternative perspectives.* Catalytic synthesis is blocked by the action of a strong inhibitor sign, making it difficult for Nelson to pre-adapt for uncertainties of the future. As suggested by Cabell (2010), catalytic processes may lead to promotion or inhibition modes of self-regulation. Both *affective* as well as *semiotic* signs may function as markers that self-reconfigure one's personal relationships with the environment. A *value* or a *hyper-generalyzed affect* has the power to act as a catalyst, and reorient the person's construction of meanings towards the environment. As seen in *Nelson's* trajectory, the emergence of a *hipergeneralyzed feeling of distrust* brings up a *negative* outlook that colors his relationship with the work environment, and activates the inhibitor sign that blocks further constructions of alternative meanings. As the *hypergeneralized affective field of distrust* takes over, the cycle of inhibition brings rigidity to meaning-making and even "freezes" meanings around a kind of *"black hole"*—the position of **Company-Employee**—that swallows all possible alternative meanings.

The cycle of inhibition of alternative meanings seems to function through transitive relations that are *closed for the incompleteness of the future.* Past and future become deceptively interchangeable through the re-enactment of a "dream-shadow" version of Nelson's self, of a *"being-that-might-have-been" (instead of a "being-in-becoming")*, built out of mutual-in-feeding and escalation of ambivalences. In this process, ambivalent meanings are maximized and expressed through *body symptoms*—in the form of a *stress crisis*—and no significant transformation (synthesis) takes place in the self-system that would allow for the emergence of a productive generative future perspective.

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