



Human Life Course as Constructive Migration

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the systemic features of the life-span development approach which was initially elaborated by Baltes (1989) and more recently considered by Greve (*Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 1–21, 2023). I argue that the life-span development approach should recognize the agentivity of people as they not only passively react to changes inside and around themselves but rather imaginatively co-construct their selves (and, their environment) through aging. The irreversibility of human development is highlighted in this paper simultaneously with the recognition of the significance of past phenomenological experiences for self-construction. People are considered as historical agents who evolve through gradual qualitative transformations instead of jumping from one discrete (age) category to another. I consider “migration” as a metaphor for “development” (aging) as both imply movement from one temporal position to another as well as moving from one social position to another. The changes related to aging put an adult in a position similar to immigrants who occur abroad and need to make sense of their new positions in relation to their personal and cultural background and the immediate reality/context they live in. Migration and aging both lead to the innovative mixture of the meaning of old and new experiences/knowledge and the creation of new forms of selfhood and personal understanding at different temporal positions.

Keywords Human development · Migration · Life-span development · Baltes · Cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics

Greve (2023) discusses ways of further developing the paradigmatic framework of lifespan human development which he considers as one of the (last) attempts at the creation of a Grand theory in psychology. It was originally proposed by Baltes (Baltes, 1987; Baltes et al., 1999), however, had roots in much earlier historical figures’ thoughts like Erik Erikson and Charlotte Bühler. The life-span development

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approach represents a significant attempt to elaborate a dynamic and conceptually “historical-developmental” approach to the dynamics of the human life course.

Greve (2023) attempts to further develop it by considering its relation to the evolutionary theory, however, I assume that the systemic conceptualization of life-span development requires additional elaboration and clarification of particular systemic regularities. The significance of person-centredness and imaginative constructivism for the proper conceptualization of human developmental dynamics will be emphasized in this paper. I metaphorically consider aging as the process of “migration” from the original departure “place” towards another temporal point that implies movement through different sociocultural positions/roles/statuses. The latter process ensues continuous (re)negotiations of current, previous, and expected positions as well as related memories.

Considering Systemic Features of the Life-Span Developmental Approach

Does the Development Have an End-Point?

Noone among sane psychologists would openly deny that humans continue to change after puberty, however, as Greve (2023) noticed even “Freud and Piaget would not have called the changes during adulthood and especially older age “development”. Maybe, because, development sadly often is implicitly associated with progress, instead of transformation. Accent on life-span development in contemporary handbooks rather takes the form of general statements for common-sense courtesy than the methodological program. Besides, even those mainstream developmental psychologists, who (e.g., Erikson) cover the whole life course were largely interested in the description of different stages of development rather than in qualitative transformations evolving throughout human life and underlying mechanisms (except Piaget).

Baltes (1999) and the life-span-oriented theoretical proposition highlighted a significant shift in focus from a childhood/puberty-centered look to a “developmental” conception of “development” that should naturally and common-sensically cover the whole period of human life, from prenatal development to death. The life-span development approach highlights the constant and continuous process of higher mental transformations. The latter accent resulted in abundant human aging studies in psychology in recent decades. However, it remains unclear what exactly the concept of “development” signifies exactly, which calls for further elaboration.

I will attempt to consider a systemic view on “development” by having Greve’s (2023) representation of “development” in focus as it is among the most dynamic conceptions of the human life course. interestingly, a comprehensive representation of “development” calls for further reflection on relevant concepts like adaptation and change/stability from a person-centered cultural psychological perspective. I will try to undertake these tasks in this paper by using a particular phenomenological field of development, proculturation, bringing migration as a metaphor for the

understanding of the process of aging that would allow making a step toward the systemic understanding of changes in higher mental functions.

The Life Course as Migration Through Time

I assume the process of getting older in a way could be compared to the migration from one country to another where people move together with their (mental) background and are challenged to adapt to a significantly new position and (inner and outer) circumstances. Migrants procreate creatively mixing heritage and foreign cultural elements creating new cultural forms as they occur in a new social position in a new context (Gamsakhurdia, 2020). Similarly, people at different stages of life, again and again, occur in new roles/statuses through growing older which gradually makes them “temporal migrants” in their own lives – by moving from being a child/young to elderhood through adulthood. Or to say otherwise, the same person occurs in an elder physical body, and the psyche migrates from the young flesh to the elder body, putting him into a new social position. The latter is the change that is probably among the toughest challenges to adapt to for many people.

Elders remember experiences from the previous period of life that might become a mental resource or liability in the new reality depending on their context and the meaning (interpretation) that they have for the individual. Elder people as well as migrants continuously recreate themselves in their new status/position and continue their previous life, not jumping from one unrelated discreet developmental stage to another changing one social role/identity (young) by another (adult and elder). The latter point is significant to avoid conceptual ontologisation of social roles and identities. So, change rather means innovative reconstruction in light of the new realities than the simple replacement of elements of self-perception at different phases of life (Gamsakhurdia, 2022).

Notably, the new meaning of any object, including the self and its body is hardly ever completely new and rather represents continuous imaginative (re)interpretation in relation to older, present, and expected developments. Each new meaning is an innovative fusion of old and new “interpretants” and knowledge(s), however, it never is their simple sum. So, aging does not add up new meanings or statuses to the self mechanically, but rather qualitatively transforms already existing ones, building on them the new form of the self.

Notably, the meaning-making process and its products – roles, identities, values, norms, etc. play an essential role in the functioning of any person and constitute a crucial part of their selfhood development as humans are fundamentally normative creatures (Brinkmann, 2015, 2017).

Cultural Coordination of Aging

The perception of aging and different periods of life are always culturally coordinated. Any society has a few hegemonic social representations of each age creating and encouraging expectations and intentions in relation to any moment of a life course. Language and cultural categories of toddlerhood, childhood, puberty, youth,

middle age, and elderhood are differently understood and organized in different societies, whereas some societies might have different categorical systems (for example, the literal translation of “toddlerhood” is not available in the Georgian language). Representation of development in separate stages is itself a sociocultural construction. Occasionally, generational “conflicts” continuously reshape the perception of different aspects of human development.

Furthermore, cultural voices set particular standards and fashionable trends which direct people’s perceptions toward a particular course. Popular standards of what is the ideal form of a body, which is the better or “golden” age, and what should be the main value in life define how people perceive their age. Particular objects which are provided by society/culture promote particular trends and constraint other orientations. For example, the industry of cosmetics, fashion, and fitness praises particular features and sacralizes “youthhood” by providing numerous remedies for maintaining youngness and rejuvenation. Particular pieces of clothing might become the symbol of being in shape and so young. For example, wearing high-hill shoes might become the source of a feeling of rejuvenation for young women. Besides, the internalized norms concerning the value of different ages are embodied and externalized in various forms like clothing, self-care routines, and behavioral lifestyle. At different age, people are expected to wear different styles of cloth. So, the culture encourages particular trends and provides artifacts through which those trends are embodied and suggested.

Overall, cultures provide and encourage certain ways of perception of the process of aging. Each society nurtures particular forms of transition from youth to elderhood. People have particular expectations as to how elders should behave and also, how young people should act towards them. The role of elders is culturally regulated by relevant social representations. In some societies, elders remain as heads of household, whereas in some other societies, they live independent lives (with their spouses maybe). So, the migration towards elderhood is culturally coordinated and guided.

The perception of age changes through historical development as well as its temporal categorization. For example, 30-a 35-year-old man was regarded as fairly old/ancient in Lev Tolstoy’s and Honore de Balsac’s novels, however, nowadays the same period is often categorized as late youth. Moreover, if in the past, older people were associated with wisdom, in the contemporary internet-age young generations are more skilled and knowledgeable than elders in certain techno-social domains of life that shifted the representation of different age groups. Wisdom and knowledgeability now become more domain-specific and less relatable to age. Greve (2023) neatly notices that the most stable aspect of development is “change”.

So, development implies not simply getting or losing particular elements but rather an idiosyncratic but culturally guided and continuous reconstruction and blending of old and new meanings in light of new experiences and changes in their inner self, body, and external environment. Aging is a continuous transitive migration from one temporal and sociocultural position to another in which a person idiosyncratically recreates oneself in relation to the surrounding historical context.

Development is Not Always “progress” – Considering the Dynamics of Change

Interestingly, the uniqueness of the life-span development approach was additionally defined by its recognition of the non-directionality of human development (Greve, 2023). Greve, following Baltes, highlights that human development is not necessarily progressive and might involve not only the obtainment of new elements but also might contain setbacks and loss of certain features. Thus, regress might be part of development. The latter remark is crucial as it reflects the possibility of the decay and degradation of particular mental and physical characteristics of human systems.

As Valsiner (2014) noticed decay or destruction of elements does not entail the erasure of its meaning as a decayed/lost object or ability gets a new meaning in a new historical/biographical context. Kopytoff (1986) considers the example of historical art objects which do not lose their meaning or value despite getting damaged through time. On the opposite, ancient or just damaged objects might obtain a new sense for people living around them at different historical moments and situations. A thing that was once a commodity might be singularized as a sacred object (Kopytoff, 1986), whereas, once singularized sacred objects can get transformed into commodities through their meaning-making. Similarly, the human body and its features (including abilities), young or old, represent objects which get interpreted as any other (semiotic) sign. The human body as well as the changes happening in it are under continuous reflection and interpretation. The latter processes belong to the workings of higher mental functions.

The meaning of a particular object (phenomenological experience, change in physical/mental condition/abilities, etc.) depends on the specificity of the object, situational context, and the intentions of a person/people who make sense of it. As Simmel (Simmel, 1958) indicated, the physical decay of art objects (e.g. buildings or statues) is associated with several layers of development as natural forces influence and make their unique contextual print on the manmade artifacts and gives them unique form. Ruins of artifacts are the result of mixed workings of cultural/historical and natural forces obtaining unique color and texture which is defined by their surroundings and environmental influence. As a result of the interplay between natural, cultural, and personal factors these decayed ruins of artifacts get a new specific value and meaning from contemporaries in each historical period. For example, the Parthenon in Athens, Greece is largely damaged, lost its original function and meaning, and represents a tourist attraction. However, its original name and related memories are exactly what make that object meaningful for contemporary Greeks and tourists who give new value (“interpretant”) to it. Its new meaning is defined by its history and its contemporary understanding. A similar process might evolve during human development – physical decay does not equal mental decay, but rather provides new semiotic “food” for interpretation as individuals and their social environment need to interpret changes happening during aging. The loss of a certain characteristic or meaning inevitably leads to the creation of a new personal (physical, social) reality and features that need to be made sense of. So, if a person is not young anymore then s/e becomes older and needs to make sense of these this new reality. Life consists of continuous changes in the body and external environment simultaneously, and, so, people inevitably go through sociocultural repositioning.

Importantly, becoming old does not mean the replacement of one ontologically given status by another, but rather it is a continuous change from one interrelated form of self-perception to another¹. The notions of “youngness” and “oldness” are defined dialogically and dialectically by each other in all cultures. People play with and negotiate with their “oldness” and “youngness” continuously. At some ages, people want to be older, while at other ages strive toward youth. At the age of 25 people often may focus on the feeling that “they are getting old”, whereas at 75 they may consider that they are “still young”. I assume an old person probably never completely loses the sense of youngness but rather continues to seek new forms of representing himself taking into consideration the new reality of physical decay.

Besides, elders have something that young people do not – relatively bigger practical living experience and accumulated knowledge that puts them in a very specific position assumedly granting additional (in many cultures it is called wisdom) capabilities (That could compensate for certain forms of physical decay). So, the sense of “oldness” and “youngness” co-exist and are negotiated continuously at different points of the human life course. The perception of own age is continuously ambiguous.

Between Phylogenetic and Ontogenetic Courses of Development – Constructivist View on Human Evolution

Greve (2023) mainly follows the traditional Darwinian view on evolution despite deeming it too abstract and detached from the individual level of human development. Accordingly, he considers adaptation in terms of the processes of selection, retention, and variation of particular stimuli and elements which are accessible to them in their environment. The latter view represents people as mechanistic and rather reactionary who simply manipulate given options, which are probably passed from generation to generation or are affordances available in their environment. Change in Greve`s sense is movement between already existing phenomena, though it leaves unclear the mechanism allowing qualitative innovation.

Besides, Greve, also notices that «adaptation» could not be conceived as the solemnly responsible concept for evolution if we want to arrive at psychological explanations of development. Here he highlights the significance of understanding intra and inter-individual variation (Greve, 2023). However, Greve does not provide a clear answer to the challenge just indicating that development is a complex and dynamic phenomenon and calls for the integration of main conceptual approaches and levels of analysis. It will become clear in the future if Greve`s grandiose call and plan gets realized, however, it is possible even already at the current stage to address particular fundamental conceptual points.

Interestingly, Greve, while lamenting the lack of developmental evolutionary theories, mentions Baldwin`s interest in the evolutionary approach in psychology as a minor exception, yet, his “organic selection” is surprisingly left out without any

¹ Obviously, aging is associated with physical decay.

consideration in his manuscript. However, I assume Baldwin's evolutionary theory on "organic selection" could be used as a conceptual framework that could serve as the starting point to work toward solving the question of qualitative mental innovations and idiosyncratic development that lead to innovations throughout ontogenetic and eventually at the phylogenetic levels of evolution.

According to "organic selection", individuals persistently and proactively imitate other people instead of blindly accepting/copying knowledge or practices which are provided externally. Baldwin assumes that individuals and groups tend to try and try more (instead of just following the path of "trial and error") to find better solutions and improve their "performance" of particular practices towards perfection in each particular situation (Baldwin, 1897b; Baldwin, 1902; Valsiner, 2017). So, people reconstruct whatever they imitate from others instead of just learning it. Humans objectify not only others but also simultaneously themselves as they strive to arrive at better forms of performance of particular acts. For example, a boy who learns from others how to kick a ball by foot, afterward reflects on his own behavior and repeats attempts of kicking the ball to become better in doing it. While trying to improve the technique of kicking the ball a child might invent new forms of performing that action. Thus, constructive imitation never stops (Baldwin, 1897a). In the same manner, self-construction and transformation never stop and elder people continuously reinvent themselves.

We cannot divide the child into two parts, two realities coming up to the facts of life with different capabilities, one fitted only to imitate, and the other fitted to invent. Of course, it is the same child whatever he does; and if he is gifted with the power of invention at all, this power should show itself in all that he does—even in his imitations.

James Mark Baldwin. "Invention vs Imitation" Chap. 3 in *Social and Ethical Interpretations in Mental Development: A Study in Social Psychology*. New York: Macmillan Company (1899): 90–125.

However, importantly, to go beyond Baldwin's theoretical scheme which is also reactionary, we need to explicitly recognize the agency of individuals. Humans "try and try more" not only when challenge, practice, or knowledge is presented externally, but also sometimes may act proactively by their own initiative as they are fundamentally motivated to make sense of the world as it is (Valsiner, 2021), to make changes in it for the sake of culturally encouraged urge for self-presentation, curiosity (Gamsakhurdia, 2019; Komatsu, 2010) or just to amuse oneself. Meaning-making is reconstructive and may imply theoretical or material manipulation of objects meaning/value leading to changes in the place/function of objects in the world. People act not only when there is an issue or are challenged environmentally, but sometimes even when everything functions satisfactorily and their environment suits them well. The externalization (Valsiner, 2014) of singular major discoveries or the accumulation of minor individual inventions leads to technological and mental changes at the phylogenetic level of evolution.

So, adaptation does not always imply a reaction to changes in the environment, but rather it is the process of continuous co-construction of the environment by

imaginative humans in relation to their ecosystem. People act not only when provoked externally, but sometimes also by their own creative enterprise.

Conclusions

I have here outlined a person-centered view and the systemic features of the life-span development approach which was initially elaborated by Baltes (1989) and more recently considered by Greve (2023). Baltes and Greve recognized the bi-directionality of development admitting that changes might be not only progressive but also regressive. Also, the continuity of development beyond childhood and till the end of life got efficiently highlighted by Greve. However, taking perspective from the cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics (Valsiner, 2014) I argue that the life-span development approach should recognize the agentivity of people as they not only passively react to changes inside and around themselves but rather imaginatively co-construct their selves (and, their environment) through aging.

Besides, the irreversibility of human development is highlighted in this paper simultaneously with the recognition of the significance of past phenomenological experiences for self-construction in the present. People are considered as historical agents who evolve through gradual qualitative transformations instead of jumping from one discrete (age) category to another. Mental trajectories of human development, unlike physical trajectories, are not linear. Age-related rigid categories (youthness, elderhood, toddlerhood) are culturally imposed and do not have an ontological basis, so, elder people obviously change and face physical decay, however, they never fully lose/forget the sense of youthness as it remains part of their selves.

I argue that obtaining the status of “old” does not mean that people automatically lose the sense of “youthness” even if they accept constructively their older age. An elder person has the same “I” as s/he had many years ago, just with richer experience, and knowledge, and lives in a new form that his/her body gets. It is physical abilities that might fail elders; however, the sense of youthness continues to live in humans` self-structure as an inner voice of oneself along with newly emerging “elder” sociocultural positions. In particular societies, older age is a sign of wisdom and is highly praised.

Metaphorically, “development” (aging) is considered as a “migration” from one temporal position to another as well as a moving from one social position to another in this paper. The latter changes put an aging adult in a position similar to immigrants who occur abroad and need to make sense of their new positions in relation to their personal and cultural background and the immediate reality/context they live in. Migration as well as aging leads to the innovative mixture of old and new experiences/knowledge and the creation of new forms of selfhood and personal understanding. Yet, human development is constrained by the guidance of influential sociocultural voices and objects which encourage particular values and norms.

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Declarations

Research Ethics This paper is purely theoretical; therefore, no human or animal subjects were involved in it.

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Conflict of Interest I declare that I do not have any conflict of interest with anyone. The manuscript was written solemnly by me.

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