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Commentary – Special Issue on Learning and developing over the Life course: a socio-cultural approach

Learning, development and ageing as relational and contextual processes

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Abstract: In this commentary, rather than commenting each of the papers, I propose to discuss three dimensions that cut across the papers as a whole. The first dimension refers to the diversity of ageing, the second to the relationship to time, to others and to oneself of people advancing in age and of researchers specializing in human development. The third is just proposed as a conclusion opening up the idea of the importance of dialogue to study the different psychological functions and their relationships.

This special issue is quite precious, refreshing and daring in the world of sociocultural psychology research: first, as a whole unit over the course of the six papers that make it up, it invites the researcher to reflect on his or her own representations of ageing, learning and development, and why, as specialists in learning and/or development from a sociocultural perspective, he or she has not, or only to a limited extent, investigated older people in development in his or her work (Valsiner, 2017). Then, taken one by one, each of the contributions sheds light more specifically on an aspect that reveals existing work on ageing (Isabelle Tournier, this issue), rather theoretical and/or methodological debates and impasses in the study of development (Roger Säljö, this issue), proposing essential criticisms of approaches that are already there, a research program for the socio-cultural approach to study the learning and development processes of the ageing subject (Zittoun and Baucal, this issue) and illustrate through empirical research what older people do, learn when they live or enter institutions (Zittoun, Grossen & Tarrago Salamin, this issue) or when they live at home, engage in voluntary activities (Hviid, this issue) or engage in more personal activities (self-writing, religion cf. Murakami, this issue).

This special issue therefore opens up a space for thought and reflection on the object 'the ageing person' as someone in perpetual transformation, in questioning, acting on the world just as the world acts on him or her indirectly and thus building new knowledge, new relationships to the world, to others and to oneself, i.e. as a learner and a developing person. The audacity that emerges from this special issue undoubtedly lies in the proposals made, which in a ways run counter to mainstream research and the most frequently relayed discourse on ageing and old age, either as a loss or a decline, or as a necessity to age successfully or to live it "well". Starting from the observation that ageing is mostly studied from an individualistic and atomistic perspective of the human being, the different texts contribute to considering the need to develop work not on the elderly with this position of exteriority of the researcher too often the only one mobilized, but with these people and with any person and/or institution that welcomes, surrounds, accompanies, meets, supports them... As Grossen et al. point out, in the introduction of this issue, it is a question of proposing

a concrete psychology of learning activities, themselves capable of transforming people as they grow older, starting from the study of everyday situations and showing these activities in a different social context, pointing out the need not only to take into account the different contexts or levels (macro, micro and step-by-step, cf. Zittoun and Baucal) but also their necessary articulation. And so, this special issue invites us to take a step aside: to consider differently our relationships to time, to the elderly, and therefore to others (young people as well as old people, to review our categories of “participants”) while also leading us to question our own practices and roles as researchers in changing societies!

In this commentary, rather than commenting each of the papers, I propose to discuss three dimensions that cut across the papers as a whole. The first dimension refers to the diversity of ageing, the second to the relationship to time, to others and to oneself of people advancing in age and of researchers specializing in human development. The third is just proposed as a conclusion opening up the idea of the importance of dialogue to study the different psychological functions and their relationships.

Ageing in diversity, diversity of ageing

In the empirical articles proposed here, “older people” refer to a heterogeneity of profiles: older, retired men and women, sometimes independent, living at home, engaging in voluntary activities (Hviid with the case of Paul) or engaging in activities for themselves (the case of the Japanese woman, Midori, in Murakami’s study) or being placed in institutions (recently or for several years, in Zittoun, Grossen & Tarrago Salamin’s). Most of the people participating in the studies presented here are Western people living in industrialized cities but probably there is a need to develop studies on ageing in non-Western countries, or ageing and living in the countryside in order to referring to this diversity of what we call “ageing”. The works also point out the importance of not reducing the elderly people to their social living conditions or their history, but of understanding how past and present meet for the subject and what meaning they give to becoming. Neither the social category 'old' nor the processes underlying ageing are homogeneous and reducible to a particularly homogeneous group. There is a need for research to develop a concrete psychology of ageing that is consistent with individual approaches in sociology or psychological sociology (Caradec, 2001; Lahire, 2005).

Moreover, sociocultural psychology, by allowing people as they get older to talk about their experience or to live it by submitting it to others during interviews or during observations and exchanges in everyday situations, also sheds light on the diversity within each person as they grow older: it thus makes it possible to highlight the tensions at work within the person between being and having been; between feeling "still young" and being old in the eyes of others; between activity (project) and passivity (retirement); between letting oneself be carried along and taking control of one's future...these tensions are well documented in the three empirical papers of this special issue. Developing a program for future work, Zittoun and Baucal's text shows the importance of learning at this diverse and heterogeneous period of life. Learning does not necessarily mean learning in places and spaces reserved for this purpose, but also learning in the course of everyday activities. Very nice examples from institutional work show that residents learn by resisting in their own way by occupying a piece of corridor. The re-appropriation of daily spaces and times during a move or following the departure of a loved one or a change of status shows the constant creativity and engagement

of older people in their conquest of daily life and in this quest to find a meaning to their life and to their becoming.

Reshaping relationships with time, with others, with oneself

One of the dimensions that seems essential when it comes to development and ageing is that of time. Indeed, becoming aware that we are getting older is also about being part of different temporalities and being conscious of that as shown in Hviid and Murakami's research. Everyone ages, but certain moments in life are more conducive than others to this awareness and this specific work on oneself and one's relationship with time, as well as time in relation to others and oneself. Finally, Säljö's historical and critical review of the methods used to investigate development and the problems they raise leads the researcher in psychology to question his own relationship to time as a variable in the first place, but also as a participant himself in the phenomenon he is studying. In order to conceive development as a process and not only as the result of it, it is necessary to be able to study the movements, crises, tensions faced by people who participate in research, either on the basis of situations in their daily lives or by generating ourselves as researchers, situations that can transform the relationship that the subject has with his or her work, with himself or herself and with others or with his/her activity of any kind. Based on Vygotski's work about indirect method (if we want to study development we cannot simply use the data that are directly accessible, we must constitute the object). In this sense, activity theory (Engeström, 2001) or clinic of activity (clinic of work) as developed by Clot in France (2012) offers a new look on developmental approach in the sense of development as both an object and a method: there is a need to provoke development of the activity to study it. This issue allows to reflect on these indirect methods to study ageing situated in a specific temporal and spatial perspective.

Moreover, what is interesting about Tournier's article, when put in dialogue with Säljö's one, is that it points out that the arrival of new technologies in research on the elderly is bringing about transformations at both epistemological and practical levels. Thus, the way of conceiving the relationship between researchers and research "subjects" is evolving: they are no longer studied as research objects or subjects but become co-designers of the proposed technologies. From the position of research subject or object, they become participants and co-designers of research protocols and/or digital and assistance tools supposed to facilitate their life and certain activities. Older people also change their status by becoming research partners. Change the unit of analysis, take into consideration the cultural tools available to people who are advancing in age, follow over time how they learn to use them or how they use them and in order to solve which tasks, also follow how they appropriate certain spaces, certain activities to better understand how they develop and how they learn, how they transmit to others but also how they create new ways of being in the world are some examples of learning developed in this issue. In this perspective, the notion of "developmental tasks" (Havigurst) can take on an interesting meaning here in order to study what makes sense for people who are getting older according to their way of life (at home, in a retirement home, alone or as a couple or with other roommates ...). Some links may be also forged with the Transformative Activist Stance (TAS) developed by Stetsenko (2008) and used to study the learning processes of volunteers within health and social care charities (Darley, 2018) and the engagement studied by Hviid within the community of Danish grandparents.

Dialogue as a potential space to learn and develop

By questioning the place of time in sociocultural psychology research and the way in which research integrates subjects who are advancing in age, psychology researchers are also led to question their place as citizens and the relationship between the research produced and its impact in society. While the research on older people in this special issue focuses on the importance of learning and development in this period of life, it is above all concerned with the importance of interpersonal relationships as potential spaces for development and learning for older people themselves as well as for the carers of the elderly. The narrative work proposed in Hviid's approach or the narrative work proposed to the researcher in the case of Murakami's study shows that the researcher also learns about the elderly through discourse and in particular the narratives which are reformulated, recreated with a new address: no longer the self but the researcher. Narrative biography as a developmental approach is a method that deserves to be explored in greater depth with a twofold orientation: for the researcher as a means of learning about a time that is no longer (the past of the person with whom he or she is conducting research) but also for the person who is telling the story and who thus enters into a new possible relationship with himself or herself, with others and with time (past, present and future). Thus dialogue seems to be a central activity for those who wish to study the relationships between memory, self-construction, emotions and cognitive functions. Recent work involving doctors, artists and psychologists around therapeutic gardens in certain hospital departments to support memory, spatial orientation, emotions and interpersonal relationships between nurses, carers, between carers and Alzheimer's patients for example, and between patients and their families seems to be very interesting avenues to explore around art, objects, spaces and times in the interpersonal dialogues to recreate conditions conducive to learning and development (see for examples, Rivasseau-Joncevaux & Fescharek, 2018; Yzoard, Batt, Trognon et al. 2017).

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