

Reasoning in transition: Inner dialogue and communication*

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Reflection is an inner dispute.

—Vygotsky (1989)

1. Symbolic resources as instruments to support transition processes

The volume *Transitions: Development through symbolic resources* by Tania Zittoun, significantly focused on transition moments in young people's experience and on the use of cultural symbolic resources in order to cope with these moments, stems from the area of sociocultural and developmental psychology but has much to say also to semioticians, scholars dealing with verbal communication, and argumentation scholars. Moving from this consideration, my review, which originates from the perspective of communication and argumentation studies, aims at provoking an interdisciplinary dialogue with social psychologists interested in the topic of transition, by moving from questions concerning the communicative and argumentative dynamics bound to the use of symbolic resources in transition.

Particular attention will be devoted to the argumentative perspective, namely, to the *reasoning* processes underlying to a person's decision-making activity during a transition process, and involving a community-based dialogical dimension.

Tania Zittoun, who while writing of this volume was a research fellow at the University of Cambridge (UK), and is now is a professor at the Institute for Psychology and Education of the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland), tackles a relevant topic for cultural psychology and for the psychology of development, namely, transition into adult life. In this relation, she approaches the topic of how young people make use of symbolic resources (verbal and non-verbal messages such as books, songs, movies, dialogical exchanges, etc.) to

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support their delicate and decisive choices during transition processes. Even at first sight, thus, the book offers an interesting field for reflecting also to semioticians and communication scholars, who might be particularly interested in the process by which the confrontation with some form of text or message can guarantee the backing for human development.

2. The object and methodology of Zittoun's work

This volume is based on a theoretical approach to the problem of transition in youth and on the analyses of some young people's experiences of rupture and transition moments. On the basis of some most significant examples of personal uses of symbolic resources in transition, the author comes back to give general insights on development through the use of symbolic resources. The work, introduced by Jaan Valsiner, who highlights the value of Zittoun's theoretical approach, is nicely organized as back-and-forth movement between theoretical reflection and empirical insights.

The first two chapters are focused on the reconstruction of a convincing definition of *transitions* in youth and of *cultural experiences* respectively. These two chapters together constitute the necessary definitory background to face the issue of the use of cultural experiences in young people's transitions. Two aspects, among many others, deserve particular consideration as for the originality of Zittoun's approach and for their relevance to the understanding of the author's research.

First, the unity *rupture-irruption of uncertainty-transition*, which is at the heart of the present study (p. 5), implies that this book deals with the individuals' change over time and with those situations (ruptures) that question the status quo of a person's spheres of experience (p. 5) and "force" him/her to change. The present volume is concerned with developmental changes, which are defined as having three main characteristics (p. 4):

1. A developmental change is generative of new ranges of possible conduct(s);
2. It does not prevent the person from maintaining a sense of continuity and consistency;
3. It allows the person to maintain satisfying relationships with his/her environment, understood in social, material and symbolic terms.

This book, thus, is not concerned with any kind of rupture moment whatsoever but, to put it in a communicative perspective, with those reasoning processes through which a person, in dialogue with his/her cultural and personal tradition and past beliefs and in continuity with the environment, can modify something about him/herself or about his/her positioning towards culture and

the others, without thereby abandoning or denying his/her original relations and cultural heritage. From the communicative point of view, this results particularly interesting, as a person's communicative relationships (roles and flows) are developed and, thus, modified but not interrupted by means of this kind of developmental processes.

Second, the tool through which this positive and generative process is enabled is the use of *cultural experiences as symbolic resources* (see also Zittoun 2007 for a discussion of this notion) that somehow work as a bridge between a person's past and his/her future. Here, the word *experience* suggests that developmental change is not automatically guaranteed. It is rather enabled by a person's "encounter" with a cultural artefact (a semiotic tool). Being cultural, the artefact is a communicative object that condenses meaning deriving from a certain tradition. In modern society, as the author points out (see pp. 1–2 and p. 21), these cultural resources do not arrive to the individual as consistent "packages" referring to a single community and culture. On the other hand, the individual is provoked by life to refer to a "bricolage" (p. 180) of experiences that can give meaning to his/her life. This means that a person is ideally called upon to rely on different cultural communities without feeling fragmented or alienated.

Among the different types of ruptures that can be experienced during the human life, in this volume, Zittoun focuses on the delicate phase of youth; as the author suggests, "youth becomes interesting for developmental research because of its concentration of processes of transition" (p. 9).

On the basis of the careful and informative definitory work performed in the first two chapters, Zittoun proposes a methodological approach to the study of transitions in youth relying on the use of symbolic resources (chapter 3). The following chapters (4 and 5) present, with progressively increasing levels of detail, the empirical research, based on twenty-nine qualitative interviews of young people having experienced different kinds of transition processes. Five of these interviews are then selected as detailed case-studies. A brief overview of these cases is presented in the following and some of them will be discussed from the argumentative point of view further on.

- *Julia* experiences the arrival to the university as an important rupture, which somehow brings forward a transition process originated by the death of her beloved grandmother. At that time, Julia started making use of pop music, in particular written by the group the Manic Street Preachers, as a symbolic resource to cope with her pain for that loss. Eventually, she embraces the political view of the band, thus also assigning a more important role to politics in her life. In this relation, even the choice of her university (political sciences) has been very much influenced by her use of symbolic resources.

- *Eli* is a young religious Jew coming to university after having lived a year in an orthodox school (a *Jeshiva*) in Israel. The rupture he is experiencing is between two different worlds — the religious and the secular — both of which seem to feel important to him. The use of a novel by Hermann Hesse seems to be the symbolic resource that enables him to reflect on his situation in a generative and developmental way.
- *Pat* has quit school and, after a difficult moment also bound to an unhappy working experience in a computer shop, has found a satisfying job as a shop assistant in an outdoor shop. Among other symbolic resources, the experience of having been part of the Scout movement in his younger days makes him able to capitalize on some of his abilities and to reinterpret himself from a computer-assistant to an expert in outdoor activities.
- The transition that *Thomas* is experiencing seems to be bound to “the whole process of distancing himself from the form of life developed on his island [a small and culturally very uniform island is his homeland], in order to define his own system of orientation” (p. 158). Within this process of distance-taking from one’s cultural “cradle,” two different types of symbolic resources seem to work as points of reference for him: the Bible and some political biographies.
- *Max* has left home for university after a gap year in which he has been working in a fabric store. His transition phase is not completed, as he is still in the process of orienting himself and understanding his relationship with his original culture (represented by the family) and his future plans. One of the significant issues he is coping with is the question of commitment and coercion, which he seems to tackle thanks to some cultural resources bound to the art world (figurative art and novels), concerning in particular the discourse of propaganda.

The closing remarks of this fifth chapter discuss the results of the analysis of these case-studies, while chapter 6 more generally reports on the implications of the empirical component to the construction of a theoretical view on the use of symbolic resources in developmental transitions.

From this very brief overview of Zittoun’s volume, several interesting issues concerning the use of semiotic resources in transition already emerge. In the following (see sections 3–5), three major aspects will be highlighted by means of a communicative analysis of the phenomena described in this volume.

3. Cultural resources as foundational texts

In the semiotic tradition bound to the Tartu School (Lotman and Uspenskij 1987; see also the informative synthesis in Gatti 2003), particularly renowned

for its original and well-founded approach to the semiotics of culture, cultural resources, artefacts and experiences can be read as *texts*, in a broad sense of this word, which not only includes written manuscripts and orally transmitted discourses, but also nonverbal or blended instruments (from images to movies and songs) and other kinds of *experiences* that result culturally relevant to the individuals regrouped in a community. From this perspective, texts are conceived of as experiences shared by the individuals who recognize themselves as members of a certain cultural (ethnic, but also linguistic, religious, professional, etc.) community. In the perspective offered by the Tartu school of semiotics, textual experiences are a constitutive part of culture together with codes: culture, in fact, is not only constituted of codes, namely, of systems of categories through which the individual learns to interpret reality (such as language, but also iconic and gestual codes, see Danesi and Rocci 2009: 144); it also includes a “hypertext” of shared experiences (Rigotti 2005) that constitutes the community’s common ground and the basis on which the individuals’ experience is developed. “Belonging to” or “being identified with” a certain culture and its corresponding community,¹ thus, means not only to be able to decode its codes but also having experienced together something that is condensed in a verbal (written or oral) text — a novel, an etiological myth, a constitution, a pact (like the Federal Pact of 1291 originating the Swiss Confederation), but also lyrics, a sacred book, etc. — or even in a non-verbal text, such as a statue, some culinary tradition, the celebration of certain religious or civic festivities, etc. Zittoun’s use of the concept of symbolic resources as potential engines for development is indicative of the nature of texts as *experiences* that those semiotic means acquire in the transition process.² Indeed, they constitute a premise and so to speak the repertory of experiences that are at the basis of the individual’s (as a person belonging to a certain community) decision and, in particular, of his or her way of living the experiences of rupture and transition.

From the argumentative point of view, these texts work as *foundational texts* (Rigotti 2005) of a person who feels part of a given community, namely, as experiences that become at the same time *repertoires of cultural premises* to reason out solutions in moments of crisis or rupture.

More specifically, the reference made to a certain symbolic resource, interpreted as a foundational text, in a phase of transition, can furnish the premises of the reasoning bringing young people to make a certain decision about their life. This is particularly evident in the case of one of the interviewees, Pat (p. 149), who has gone to work, leaving secondary school after a couple of attempts that resulted unsuccessfully for different reasons. This experience of failure (p. 149) was followed by a subsequent moment of alienation as Pat found a job in a big computer shop as a customer-service attendant; indeed, the computer company appeared to produce low quality merchandise while Pat’s role as customer-care assistant did not allow him to do anything but apologize

for not solving clients' problems. Eventually, thus, Pat found himself to be hopelessly frustrated and distressed by a job that was morally unacceptable to him.

The turning point in Pat's experience coincides exactly with the moment in which he becomes aware of the fact that his job is unacceptable because his actual role is contradictory to the goal of a customer-care service, and finds other employment in an outdoor activities shop of which he used to be a client.

In relation to the difficult moments preceding this decision, Zittoun analyses Pat's previous experience of having been part of the Scout movement (from five years of age to young adulthood) as a symbolic resource helping him in the transition process. In a first sense, Pat's interest in outdoor activities developed in the Scout movement enables him to imagine the job in the shop as a real possibility for him to develop his "second main interest" beyond computers (p. 152). And, even more importantly, the Scout experience seems related to the "high moral values" (p. 153) that Pat declares to have and that enable him to leave a (relatively well-paid) job out of reasons of moral dissatisfaction. In this sense, the experience of having participated in the Scout activities, as Zittoun highlights (p. 155), helps Pat develop a system of values; if this process is considered from the argumentative point of view, we may say that, from this system of values, Pat draws the premises to judge his first job as contradictory to his goal of being a real customer-care person, who actually *cares* for his clients, and therefore to leave the job as inappropriate.

4. The argument scheme from analogy in transition processes

In the examples discussed in detail by Zittoun, the reference to texts appears to suggest to young people various reasoning paths (argument schemes) underlying and supporting their decision-making processes in transition.

A reasoning path that emerges with particular relevance is that of the *locus*³ based on a relation of *analogy* (Rigotti and Greco 2009; Rigotti 2006). On the basis of this reasoning path, a comparison is established, in the specific cases considered in this volume, between the real world in which the "protagonist" of the reasoning lives and acts, and a parallel world. The latter could represent an imaginary (unreal) world, depicted, for example, in a song, novel, or fictional movie. But it can also be a different portion of the real world, in which other people live, for example, the members of a pop band; or a representation of the real world as it was in the past, described, for example, in an historical biography of a renowned politician (p. 160), or even in the representation of the world as it might be in the future (think to some passages included in sacred texts). In Zittoun's account, the fruition of symbolic resources, such as books or other forms of text, is always an activity that projects the individuals into the

world and helps them experience some important aspects of their life. In other words, there is a tight connection between the world of the cultural resource and the person's real world of experience. In this sense, reading is not a *dis-tractive* activity that subtracts the person from his/her experience but is an important part of experience connected to the individual's life by means of analogy: symbolic resources "create an imaginary sphere where personal, unique experiences meet culturally elaborated versions of other people's comparable experiences" (Zittoun 2007: 348). The locus from analogy, indeed, appears particularly powerful and productive in relation to the use of symbolic resources in transition moments. Indeed, it concerns the relation between two worlds — in this case, the real world of the person's experience and the world of the cultural resource — whose ontological structure, including the human condition, is perceived as analogous,⁴ despite the fact that the world of the cultural resource might be fictitious.

Exemplary in this regard is the story of Eli, a young boy who arrived to university after a year of education in a yeshiva in Israel — an orthodox, rabbinic school (p. 142). As Zittoun remarks (p. 142), attending yeshiva for one or two years is expected of young men in this religious milieu. And, although many of them enjoy this experience, going back to secular life when entering university is perceived as a rupture (Lawrence, Benedikt, and Valsiner 1992; see p. 142). The world of yeshiva and the secular academic world appear rather distinct, if not in conflict; however Eli seems to have coped with this conflict and to have solved its contradictions at the moment of the interview (pp. 143–144). In this situation, Eli explains about his experience and his way to integrate both spheres of experience in a consistent and unitary whole. In this relation, he explicitly mentions his reading of a novel by Hermann Hesse as a resource making him capable to understand that his situation was not unique and that the conflict or tension between the two worlds was something one could deal with. It is worth reporting the entire passage from Eli's interview:

Now, I was talking about this sort of . . . difficulty somehow in getting a balance between all the aspects of life. *The Glass Bead Game* [by Hermann Hesse] — do you know the book at all? — Ok, I have not read it for a while. But — erm basically, there is a sort of college on a hill, completely isolated from everything else, where the people there are very involved in a sort of esoteric learning, which is difficult to understand what it is and what sort of impact it has on anything else, and then again on the outside world obviously. And there is one character in it, who is really firmly in one world, and he feels the tension between the one world and the other world . . . And that, I mean I could really, I really read that, in terms of having been to Yeshiva and coming to University, obviously there weren't exact parallels, but I could relate to that very strongly. Erm — and, I don't think the book actually helped to resolve the conflict, the actual conflict, it didn't really help, it sort of more . . . it demonstrated the differences, I think

— but it helped. It is nice to know that other people are thinking the same thing you are. (p. 145)

Zittoun discusses this passage by highlighting the developmental power that reasoning by analogy had on Eli's way to cope with the situation. She observes that the correspondence established between Eli and the novel's character "enables Eli to think the passage from one sphere of experience to the other, and the relation that link these two. This might also enable thinking the character to have a complex identity, bringing particular values to the secular world" (p. 146). In other words, the example given by the presence of a character that can be interpreted as analogous to Eli can give him the resources to see his own experience from a more detached point of view (Zittoun 2007: 347–348) and return to it with the feeling that the conflict can be resolved. The analogy does not provide a ready-made solution for Eli's problem, but it demonstrates that it is possible to cope with his kind of problems.

5. Community-based use of symbolic resources

Up to now, the relation between the process of individual decision-making in the transition moment and the argumentative activity has not been deepened. Indeed, the two domains cannot be considered as wholly overlapping. However, some characteristics of the argumentation process proper do not apply to the case of individual reasoning. In fact, argumentation is defined as a *social* communicative activity (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004) in which at least two interlocutors are committed to critically test the reasons supporting their positions in order to find a reasonable solution to their *difference of opinion*. In argumentation, the interlocutors share the commitment to persuade each other and to critically found their position *in front of* each other (Rigotti and Greco Morasso 2009). This also leaves open the possibility that the other interlocutor, as a human being, provides unforeseeable arguments or changes his or her position, thereby surprising the interlocutor. The element of unpredictability or "surprise" is not present in inner dialogue, at least not to the same extent as in the encounter between two human beings.

For these reasons, individual reasoning is to be sharply distinguished from argumentation. However, it is wise not to think of two separate spheres that have nothing in common. Rather, a phenomenon of *continuity* can be identified in relation to these two domains, at least in two different senses.

In a first sense, it emerges that the inferential structures activated in inner dialogue and individual reasoning or in the process of social, communicative reasoning typical of argumentation, namely, technically speaking, the *loci* (Rigotti 2006), are the same. The locus from authority, drawing on the

reliability of the source by which a certain statement is originated, the locus from the final cause, so common in pragmatic reasoning, the locus from analogy, and many others are at work both in pure argumentative processes and in individual decision-making processes; these inferential forms, in fact, are connected with the proper process of *reasoning*, which is at work both in the individual and in the social forms (Rigotti and Palmieri 2009).

Second, as it clearly emerges in Zittoun's model of a person's use of symbolic resources, the person is never alone with the cultural resource he/she has selected as a source of inspiration for his/her change. The fruition of cultural resources, according to the *semiotic prism* proposed by Zittoun (p. 37), includes a relation to "the real or imagined other" (p. 37) for whom the semiotic alliance between the sign or cultural element and its meaning exists (see figure 1).

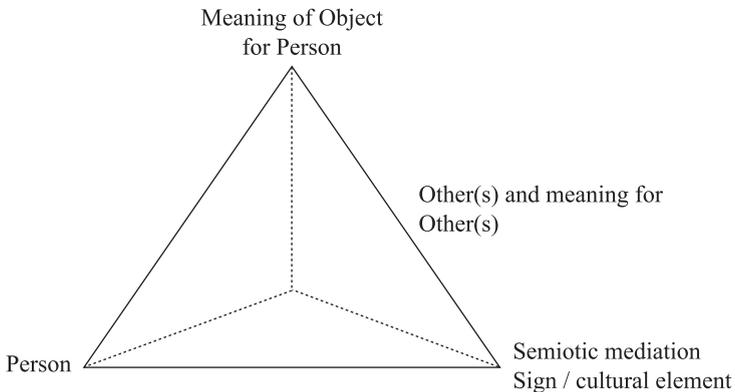


Figure 1. Zittoun's semiotic prism (p. 37)

This means that cultural resources are not used in a solitary manner, but they are interpreted in connection and so to say in dialogue with a community of reference. This community may be constituted by the authors of the cultural resources themselves (for example, as in Julia's case, the authors of the pop music she listens to),⁵ but also by other users of the same resources (in Julia's experience, the people who follow the pop group she favors share their political and ideological views, discuss together in internet forums, and so on). But the community of reference can also be constituted by the young person's family, his/her community of origin (as in Thomas's case, see p. 158), or by a religious community (as in Eli's reference to the Yeshiva community that he has left for university, see p. 141). The reference to and (more or less explicit) dialogue with one's community in the individual choices also emerges in other works, such as Zittoun (2004), where the author discusses the process of the parental

choice of the first name for their babies; or Zittoun et al. (2008), in which some war diaries are analyzed as condensation of the parties' reasoning about their identity in a moment of rupture.

The process of inner dialogue orienting one person's decisions and attitudes in transition is usually contiguous with other forms of proper argumentation, as "uses of symbolic resources necessarily constitute a bridging between inner world and shared reality" (Zittoun 2007: 345). Indeed, in the process of making a personal decision, in particular in difficult cases such as leaving school, moving to another country or changing job, one can already anticipate or imagine the public dialogue with his/her community of reference or with those individual who are relevant to the decision (for example, the colleagues met at the workplace that one is about to leave). Usually, a phase of public dialogue follows the individual phase; even more realistically, one can imagine subsequent stages alternating between individual reflection and public discourse.

6. Some agenda items for further research

The emerged relation of continuity between argumentation and individual reasoning is a particularly promising direction of research. First, it allows deepening the study of loci or reasoning patterns that prove to be active not only in argumentation, as many research approaches demonstrate (Garssen 2001; Rigotti 2006), but also in individual reasoning processes. In this relation, on the one hand, the presence of the locus from analogy in transition moments could be deepened and investigated on a larger corpus of data. On the other hand, further loci could be identified; presumably, for example, the locus from the final cause, focused on the ontological relation between an action and its intended goal, is relevant in the process of individual decision-making orienting one's practical decisions.

Second, the continuity between process of inner dialogue and communication emerged by this review can be traced back to the semiotic tradition linked to Bakhtin (see in particular Bakhtin 1981; see also Marková 2006), with its approach to dialogism (Marková et al. 2007). The cross-fertilization between this type of semiotic studies and the argumentative approach can provide interesting insights to the study of reasoning.

Notes

1. As Rigotti (2005) observes, cultural identity is normally not exclusive. The same individual can belong to different cultural communities that are generally ordered according to the hierarchy of importance that the individual attributes to them.

2. “Semiotic tools encapsulate other people’s experiences and interpretations of the world, in various times and places” (Zittoun 2007: 344). Such definition highlights the twofold nature of symbolic resources, which represent not only categorial codes to interpret reality but also experiences that one can rely on.
3. The Latin term *loci* indicates literally the “places” or ontological relations from which actual arguments are derived, namely, the inferential schemes that originate arguments by means of specific *argument schemes* (Garssen 2001). Loci are properly based on a logical component (the proper inferential “scheme”) but, as soon as they are actually applied in order to construct real arguments, they also include a context-bound component linked to cultural premises shared in a certain community (Rigotti 2006).
4. In this case, there is a potential risk of manipulation linked to the possibility of assimilating two domains whose analogies are only partial and irrelevant. In this case, of course, the reasoning would be invalid.
5. In fact, the symbolic resource is in itself *cultural*, insofar as it is constituted by a text that is by nature produced by somebody else. Reading, in this sense (as well as other forms of apparently individual fruition of cultural resources like watching a movie or listening to a song), is not a solitary activity, but implies a sort of dialogue at least with the author(s).

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