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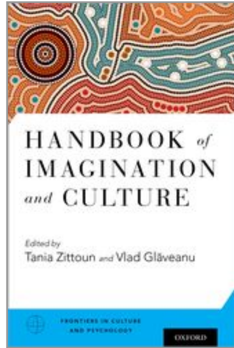

Handbook of Imagination and Culture
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Imagination in Adults and the Aging Person

Possible Futures and Actual Past

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Abstract and Keywords

Life course psychology has taught us that people change and develop lifelong. Also, imagination plays an important role in the making of our life course, especially in transitions or bifurcation points. However, if imagination has been quite studied in children and adolescents, what about imagination in adulthood and, especially, in older adults? In this chapter, the authors present a model of imagination to be used in the life course. The authors review the literature on aging and identify the role of imagination within it. Finally, the authors discuss an extreme case of development, which comes about when the future seems interrupted because of a trauma. Through the case study of an older woman's development after the Fuskushima catastrophe, the authors provide a general reflection about the role of imagination in the life of adults and elderly people.

Keywords: aging, imagination, life course, trauma, Fukushima

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Life course psychology has taught us that people change and develop lifelong. Also, imagination plays an important role in the making of our life course, especially in transitions or bifurcation points. However, if imagination has been quite studied in children and adolescents, what about imagination in adulthood and, especially, in older adults? In this chapter, we present a model of imagination to be used in the life course. We review the literature on aging and identify the role of imagination within it. We finally discuss an extreme case of development that comes about when the future seems interrupted because of a trauma. Through the case study of an older woman's development after the Fukushima catastrophe, we develop a general reflection about the role of imagination in the life of adults and elderly people.

Imagination in the Life Course

Imagination has been long present in occidental philosophy and psychology (see Jørgensen, chapter 2; Klempe, chapter 12). In developmental psychology, imagination has been studied mainly in children, as part of normal development (see Hviid & Villadsen, chapter 7; Jovchelovitch et al., chapter 6). Depending on the definition of imagination, this process can also be seen as central in human life, far beyond childhood and far beyond artistic activities (see Valsiner, chapter 4). Drawing on a sociocultural, semiotic approach of human development, and on authors such as Mead and Vygotsky (Mead, 2001; Vygotsky, 1931), we have defined imagination as *the process of temporarily disengaging from the here and* ***(p.188)*** *now of a sphere of experience* (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). As any semiotic process, it demands the use of various resources in order to take some distance from the current present and situated experience. Such loops can be described along three dimensions. First, looping out, imagination can have different time orientations; it allows exploring the past, presenting alternatives, or the future. Second, these loops can be more or less distant from actual situations, and thus can be more or less done through concrete materials or in more general or abstract terms. Third, imagining can be more or less probable or plausible in a given sphere of experience and social setting. Also, imagination can be described as a sequence: it is usually triggered by specific events; then develops as the loop itself, which is not submitted to the laws of temporality and causality and thus expands experiences beyond the social, material, or symbolic constraints of a situation (Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013),

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thanks to the use of various resources; and finally, rejoins the here and now of the socially shared reality in which the person is situated. In effect, an important property of imagination as a loop is that the looping movement *comes back* to the actual, ongoing present, with a given sphere of experience. Imagination that would be locked in the past, or in an alternative reality, would not enrich the present; it would be the case of trauma, for instance, or hallucination (Figure 9.1).

A sphere of experience can be defined as a configuration of activities,

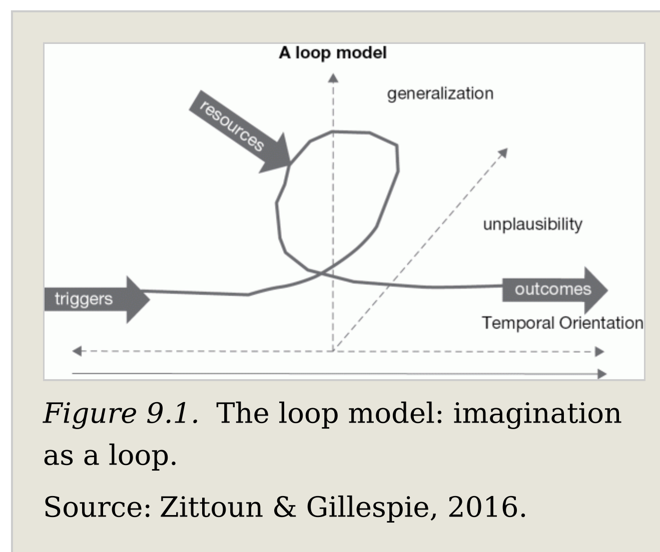

Figure 9.1. The loop model: imagination as a loop.

Source: Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016.

representations, and feelings, recurrently occurring in a given type of social (material and symbolic) setting (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). It is reasonable to think that imagination can take place in different spheres of experience. In each sphere of experience, imagining uses people's experiences and knowledge as well as available semiotic elements as resources. As was proposed by Vygotsky (1931, 1933), we can consider that, as a consequence, domains of activities in which people have a high level of expertise, or with which they have longer acquaintances and about which they have rich social interactions, are also domains in which imagination can draw on more resources and possibly become more differentiated and **(p.189)** articulated. Of course, that does not prevent imagining in any other domains with even more freedom and intensity. Simply, the imagination of a car engineer might engage in details that a 10-year-old child could not; yet the child, having less elements to draw on as resources, might also have less constraints in his or her imaginings. Less resources implies less constraints—and this, as has been pointed by creativity research, might explain why physicists often had

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their more brilliant ideas in their youth (Verhaeghen, 2011, p. 184).

This type of consideration brings us to consider that imagination takes place all along the life course and keeps developing lifelong (Zittoun et al., 2013). It is, however, likely that imagination develops not as a decontextualized cognitive capacity but instead in different situated activities and spheres of experiences. Hence, adolescents develop imagination in the sphere of experience that matters to them—family life, nourished by shared narratives; youth relationships, nourished by media and interpersonal discussions; or questions about their future, nourished by social expectations and social representations (de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, in press; Zittoun & de Saint-Laurent, 2015).

From a life course perspective, imagination occurs not only in and across a variety of spheres of experience but also in specific moments. The study of the life course has shown the importance of ruptures—experiences of disruption of what is taken for granted in everyday life, caused by different types of internal or external demands (Levy, Ghisletta, Le Goff, Spini, & Widmer, 2005; Wapner & Demick, 2005; West, 2006; Zittoun, 2012). Ruptures are usually followed by transitions—the process of exploration of new modes of acting, knowing, presenting, or defining oneself in relation to others, and sense making. As such, imagination might play an important role in ruptures. One clear case is that of bifurcation points—ruptures that bring people to have to choose or create one possible pathway out of many (Sato, Hidaka, & Fukuda, 2009; Sato, Yasuda, Kanzaki, & Valsiner, 2013; Zittoun & Valsiner, 2016). In effect, it is at these moments that people have to create possible pathways, or explore the possible outcomes of each of them. Even more, it is quite likely that options not chosen are then explored later on in life through imagination (Zittoun & Valsiner, 2016).

In addition, imagination itself can develop. It can develop horizontally, when transversal enrichment occurs—transferring imagination across spheres of experience (see also Akkerman, chapter 10). For example, imagination related to one's grandfather can become a metaphor guiding one's actual family life (Zittoun & de Saint-Laurent, 2015), or imagining related to one's professional field can be transferred to one's actual life situation, as described by Primo

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Levi in his account of surviving in the Nazi death camps thanks to his skills as a chemist (Levi, 1995). Also, imagination can develop more vertically, when more generalized forms of imagining emerge. Hence, having had many experiences of imagining in transitions can also lead to development of a more personal style of dealing with events, as we will see in this chapter (Zittoun et al., 2013).

Altogether, then, our starting arguments are that imagination develops along the life course, but also that imagination participates in the development of the person along the life course (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Here, exploring aging **(p. 190)** and trauma, we will argue that imagination plays a very important role in re-engaging growth when development seems interrupted.

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Developing With Age

With the aging of the population in most countries—in industrial societies and developing ones (Davies & James, 2011)—there has been a growing interest in social sciences and policy making about the specificities of the life of older people. In the social sciences, aging is usually understood as starting at the local age of formal retirement (Stuart-Hamilton, 2011), about 60 to 65 years. Although “a fundamental point of departure should be the recognition that ageing people are adults and citizens like others” (Baars & Philipson, 2013a, p. 11), in contemporary societal contexts, being older than 50, or 60, or 65 years often means being treated differentially by others (e.g., as seniors, as emeritus, as grandparents), represented differently—and people come to perceive themselves differently. In social sciences as well, there has been a progressive increase and then transformation in the way aging is theorized.

In what follows, we will mainly refer to three types of approaches to development with age. The first one is that of the dominant paradigm, studying health and cognition with age as a personal issue that can be objectified through clear measures—we refer to it as the dominant paradigm because it is also the most influential (Albert & Ferring, 2013; Baltes & Mayer, 1999; Stuart-Hamilton, 2011). Second, more critical stances have emerged, among which is the more consistent “narrative” trend in gerontology (Baars, Dohmen, Grenier, & Phillipson, 2013; Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2011). Third, we will refer to a sociocultural, semiotic perspective of the life course (Sato et al., 2009; Valsiner, 1998, 2014; Zittoun, 2012; Zittoun et al., 2013; Zittoun & Valsiner, 2016). Basically, if the first paradigm is quite normative, based on nomothetic approaches adopting a third-person perspective, and often identifying linear causalities, the two others are more ideographic, trying to account for the person’s perspective and for complex configurations of events.

Hence, first, in the main gerontology literature, from a vision of aging as biological decline and mainly slow social disengagement (Cumming & Henry, 1961), there has been over the past 50 years a progressive discourse on “successful” or “active” aging (Baltes & Mayer, 1999; Freund, 2008; Thomae, 1963). These approaches emphasize the possibilities and the means by which people can, after their retirement age, maintain good health and psychological conditions, for

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instance, through regular physical and mental exercise, social participation, intergenerational commitments, leisure, and so forth. Such readings, which have become mainstream in gerontology and gerontopsychology, are also highly normative. If they sometimes come out of a humanistic concern, they also follow the worries of socioeconomic systems that have to take on the costs of health care of elderly people with a reduced workforce at a time when less pensions are paid by younger generations.

(p.191) Different critical readings of the idea of successful aging have come to the fore, emphasizing its policy-oriented nature, the gender bias, or the lack of sensitivity to people's differentiated experience (Davidson, 2011). This reading has also shown the perverse effect of a discourse on successful aging on people themselves (Stenner, McFarquhar, & Bowling, 2011). Other have more dramatically siglaed the overall negative social representations of older adults in society, or "ageism" (e.g., Nelson, 2005). Hence, one critical question has become, How people can keep a meaningful orientation to life, that is, a connected mode of understanding their existence, even though society tends to "exile" them from "normal adulthood"? (Baars & Philipson, 2013a, p. 11). From a more psychological perspective, if development is a life course phenomenon and aging starts with one's birth, is there some development specific to aging persons? Actually, it appears that little is known about the *development* of aging people as such. As Baars and Philipson observe, there is an "underdeveloped vocabulary of ageing, which limits the possibilities to express personal feeling by older people or to articulate existential issues. . . . The history of religion and philosophy demonstrates that while thinking about death is abundant, by comparison, thinking about ageing is relatively scarce—especially in the context of Western culture" (Baars & Philipson, 2013b, p. 3). This lack of vocabulary is consequential not only for aging people but also for social scientists and policy makers. Also note, however, that the life course perspective has been rarely applied to aging (Jeppson Grassman & Whitaker, 2013). In what follows, we draw on recent literature to highlight some emerging modes of addressing aging and, in that regard, some specific challenges.

Aging and Maintaining the Future Open

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Besides the mainstream literature on biological and cognitive changes with age, there is a growing body of more critical, interpretative literature on aging, which tries to account for the meaning if not the richness of older life from a humanistic and narrative perspective (Baars et al., 2013; Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, & Robinson, 2015; Kenyon et al., 2011).

The question of how to define aging has been addressed from a moral philosophy perspective; in his review of the recent evolution of the field, Dohmen (2013) recapitulates that since the 1970s and 1980s aging has been addressed in moral terms. He also highlights a core issue of our contemporary society, which is that of defining or living "one's own life" and therefore appropriating one's own aging. To develop a moral or an ethic aging, he suggests, demands older people's reflective distance on the demands of the proposal made to them, a capacity to realize how one has been expropriated of his or her own life and therefore can appropriate it, which might imply renouncements to choices made earlier under various demands to define one's own authentic goals. This might lead to new commitments, new engagements, a form of serenity, and the understanding of one's finitude (Dohmen, 2013). Another term coined to address people's aging is "agency"—which needs to be redefined as people may lose an earlier capacity **(p.192)** to move, act, or express themselves with age (Grenier & Philipson, 2013), or "self-realization" (Laceulle, 2013). If this literature highlights some of the moral underpinnings of the reflection on aging, it does not yet document actual aging.

A more consistent and empirically grounded body of literature emerges from narrative gerontopsychology, which also examines the meaning of aging for people themselves, through the modes of telling one's life (Coleman et al., 2015; Kenyon et al., 2011). One question is, indeed, under what conditions people can develop a satisfying narrative, especially as some actual possibilities seem to decline progressively. In effect, one question is whether "narrative foreclosure" may occur along the life course—a situation "in which people had gathered the conviction that the story of their lives was essentially over" (Freeman, 2011, p. 3). According to Freeman, foreclosure can occur either because one perceives the sociocultural conditions as limiting any future choice, because one has built a feeling of failing or not being able to attain one's goals, or, alternatively, because of one's loss of mental

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capacities. In that sense, narrative foreclosure occurs not only in older people but also, for instance, in people whose professional goal turns unachievable or, in the extreme case, in those who survived extreme conditions such as concentration camps with all the guilt that implies. In extreme cases, narrative closure can lead to depression or suicide. Freeman also suggests that, in some cases, through a redefinition of oneself and one's relation to others and the world, alternative pathways can be opened. The opposite to narrative foreclosure is "narrative openness", which

> is characterized by the sense that, despite the setbacks and struggles in one's life and the prospect of its coming to an end, one's story isn't over. There's always something new to be experienced: a relationship to nurture, a discovery to be made, a lesson to be learned. There is somewhere still to grow. Biologically, there is a built-in limit to our life (120 years, give or take), but biographically, there is none whatsoever to our story, no necessary endpoint to our narrative development. (Randall, 2013, p. 167)

The question is, therefore, How it is possible to develop and maintain an open-ended narrative when the end course of one's actual life is approaching, without seeing it simply as adjustment to the "reality principle"? (Thomae, 1963)—that is, as coined by Freud, the unquestionable reality of one's finitude (Freud, 1989). And indeed, situations that might seem hopeless from the outside—for example, being immobilized in old age after an accident, when one used to be a salesman constantly traveling—can actually be accepted as part of life and not prevent the person from being content (Gubrium, 2011, p. 49). Various dynamics that support narrative openness, or rather, in our terms, the possibility to imagine a future, have been identified. We will recall them, before highlighting the role of imagination in ongoing growth.

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What Is It That Develops With Age?

One notion that came about to identify age-specific development is "wisdom," both in common sense and various philosophies and then in psychology (Baltes, **(p.193)** 2004; Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004). In the psychology of aging people, the term has also been used for some time to identify some specific learning. In his 1963 paper, Hans Thomae mentions research on aging businessmen who were progressively reducing their worries and dissatisfaction and better adjusting their expectations to the given reality. He mentions Peck (1956), who called wisdom a form of learning of the "ageing personality," consisting of the capacity to develop "the perception of the positive aspect of the situation, to enjoy it as it presents itself" (Thomae, 1963, p. 363). This notion has regularly attracted interest since. In a recent overview paper, Staudinger recalls that

> . . . wisdom involves the search for the moderate course between extremes, a dynamic between knowledge and doubt, a sufficient detachment from the problem at hand, and a well-balanced coordination of emotion, motivation, and thought (cf. Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Wisdom is knowledge about the human condition at its frontier, knowledge about the most difficult questions of the meaning and conduct of life, and knowledge about the uncertainties of life, about what cannot be known, and how to deal with that limited knowledge. (Staudinger, 2008, p. 108)

This notion of wisdom was then operationalized in different experimental situation and scales, with the difficulty that it soon appeared to no longer be age specific (Verhaeghen, 2011).

From the perspective of the narrative tradition, Randall (2013) considers that wisdom has to encompass self-knowledge or knowledge about one's existence. Further, from such perspective, wisdom "is ultimately not a thing, not a 'body of knowledge,' but a process. To grow in wisdom, whatever else that process may entail, is to grow in (ironic) awareness of the narratives we have woven round our life's events" (Randall, 2011, p. 31). This, he suggests, demands the capacity to reopen the interpretation of one's own life narrative—positive irony, as a form of playfulness towards self, being one of the possible means (Randall, 2013, p. 178). Similar points have

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also been made by psychoanalysts working with aging persons (Quinodoz, 2008; Villa, 2010). From a semiotic, sociocultural perspective,

> [g]etting older is thus "living forward," and old age is in this the continuity throughout the individual's life history in terms of lifestyles and habits, likes and dislikes but it is also a continuous, never-ceasing stream of experiences that are losses and gains at the same time. (Zittoun et al., 2013, p. 364)

The capacity to "reopen narratives," or the sense of who one is or has achieved over time, can be said to depend on psychological distancing. Distancing demands the use of various semiotic resources enabling the person see a given event or semiotic construct from a different perspective. In that sense, irony, metaphors, and personal life philosophies are all semiotic constructs that facilitate distancing and perspective change over life experiences and memories. Opening up goes in two ways.

(p.194) On the one hand, there is the possibility to distance from one's experiences and memories. Generalizing across experience can be done thanks to metaphors (Randall, 2011). These can eventually take the function of "personal life philosophies"—that is, very general statements that summarize one's learning across existential situations (Zittoun et al., 2013). For instance, a person who survived many hardships might say "after the rain, comes the sun"—a saying available in the environment, with metaphoric value, also summarizing and crystallizing past events. In turn, opening up goes in another way: such semiotic elements can become resources, or techniques for imagining (see also Gillespie, Corti, Evans, & Heasman, chapter 14). As such, they guide future choices, support alternative reading of one's own and others' life events, and so on. Further, this basic process of distancing and reconsidering life events from a different perspective, this loop of distancing and reorienting the course of life, is precisely what we have called imagination.

Hence, in that respect, imagination might be seen as a core psychological process at the heart of all the processes identified by current research on aging, as just shown. In effect, in our understanding, narrative exploration is one means by which people engage in imagination, through the

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mediation of linguistic means as well as the cultural patterns allowing narrative (Bruner, 2003). Similarly, reminiscing, a process typically seen in older people, is an imagination oriented toward the past—which, when used as therapeutic techniques, can be seen as supported by interpersonal dialogue and narrative resources (Kenyon et al., 2011). Finally, wisdom or personal philosophies are modes or uses of imagination less oriented toward the past and in more general terms, often using metaphors as resources.

Imagination and Development With Age

If imagination is the process by which we distance from the here and now to expand the present into explorations of the past, the future, or alternative realities, then imagination is one of the necessary conditions to reopen life narratives or to engage in sense making in the life course. The question is whether imagination is present in aging or older people. From a theoretical, developmental perspective, imagination in old age—not only at 60 or 65, but also, at 80, 90, or 100 years old—should only be stronger because it can be based on people's accumulated experiences to explore and use as resources. But do older people actually imagine, and do they do so lifelong?

Various limitations to imagination have been identified in the literature on adults and aging people. Following our model, we can group them in three main categories. First, the dimensions for imagining might be constrained because of inner or outer reasons. One might be ill, with a limited time ahead, or one's cognitive capacities might decline, or the feeling of being locked in a given sphere of experience—such as a retirement home—might limit the deployment of the loop (Jeppson Grassman & Whitaker, 2013). Second, the resources used for imagining might be too constraining. Hence, it has been shown that some social **(p.195)** representations of aging have such a negative undertone that it prevents people to imagine their future as aging (Bornat & Jones, 2014). Third, if imagination demands, like all dialogical processes, to be socially shared or recognized, the loss of personal relationships or the lack of social recognition of the aging people or their "inner alter" (Marková, 2006) might actually reduce the space for imagining. It is such a combination of limitations that may bring about what has been called narrative foreclosure (Freeman, 2011)—the strong belief that

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one’s story is over because one’s means are limited, because one’s past dreams have not been satisfied, or because one’s life work has not been acknowledged.

Reversely, we can make the hypothesis that other aging people manage to maintain, if not increase, imagination, partly through social recognition and community participation and the use of appropriate resources. Consider the documented cases of the creativity of older people, whether in creative trajectories such as in music, science, or religion (Verhaeghen, 2011), or in everyday life, as the many cases of online blogs, decisions to move abroad (Zittoun et al., 2013), or engagement in political activism in older age reveal (e.g., “grand-parents for asylum” in Denmark, or the “Raging grannies” in Canada and the Anglo-Saxon world; Caissie, 2011).

Hence, from a sociocultural perspective, the limitation of imagination in adults and aging people is not a matter of age itself (unless there is major cognitive deterioration—yet even so it has to be proved that people don’t keep imagining in a very elementary way); it may rather be a sociocultural phenomenon, connected to the actual place given to aging people in our society (Marková, 2016). The counterpart of the lack of sociocultural means and recognition is actually emotional pain and burden, which can affect an aging person to the extent that they limit imagination. The extreme case of the overburdening of the mind, radically preventing imagination, is trauma. We therefore briefly turn to trauma, which we propose to reread from an aging and imagination perspective.

Trauma as Not Being Able to Imagine

Trauma is generally defined, in psychology, “as an individual response to an event or a series of events that completely overwhelm that individual’s ability to cope with the experience and, subsequently, to integrate it into their life narrative” (Stroińska, Szymanski, & Cechetto, 2014, p. 13). A consequence of such overwhelming episodes is that the experience seems, at the individual as well as collective levels, dissociated, isolated in one’s consciousness. The events are not reflected on or thought about. From a narrative perspective, trauma might lead to narrative foreclosure, as in the case of the suicide of camp survivors (Freeman, 2011).

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From a semiotic perspective, a traumatic event is one that cannot be elaborated through semiotic means. As we have written elsewhere:

> The embodied quality of experiences is, in its origin, given as a brutal happening. To be apprehended mentally, these experiences have to be linked **(p.196)** to semiotic mediations. Mnemonic traces of previous comparable experiences, in their minimal definition (Peirce, 1868), or socially shared signs, either previously internalized, or available in one's environment, have to be attached to them. Semiotic mediation minimally authorizes the grouping of fuzzy embodied impressions and then designate these groups of impressions (by a linguistic term, or also just by attaching them to any image), and eventually to include them into an articulated sequence in the flow of thinking. Thus, semiotic mediations can allow experience to become part of, and thus transform, other thoughts. Thanks to semiotic mediation, normal elaboration of experiences allows processes of linking and transformation through which they progressively fade in the flows of memories and thinking. (Zittoun, 2004, p. 484)

The usual semiotic work of making sense, which demands to bind traces of events to other traces, in time and in experience, does not take place. Only in some occurrences, these events come back to consciousness, with an immutable strength and quality of presence—in flashbacks or recurrent nightmares, as when survivor of concentration camps "go back" to their camps when asleep. These irruptions of the traumatic event are not, unlike normal dreams, worked through; they have the strong quality of a repetition (Edkins, 2003; Zajde, 2005, 2010). In addition, trauma creates various distortions of thinking because the painful zone and its related feelings of pain or shame are psychically avoided (Abraham & Torok, 1972; Tisseron, 2006, 2007).

As a consequence, trauma has a strong quality of being "out of time" (Edkins, 2003, p. 7) because the experience of time precisely demands such semiotic work (Zittoun, 2008). Based on our understanding of imagination, we could also say that trauma is a zone of experience that cannot be imagined: either one is re-experiencing the here and now of the traumatic events, isolated in that sphere of experience, or one avoids any

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semiotic work that would reactivate this zone—which demands in itself complex strategies of not using certain semiotic resources. Hence, we may say that trauma allows uncomplete loops of imagination: the stream of consciousness leaves the here and now but does not reconnect to the present. The traumatic events and the actual sphere of experiences are disconnected. In that sense, the lack of connection of past and present can also be understood as preventing the emergence of possible futures.

The clinic of trauma, in the psychoanalytically inspired literature, usually aims at "repairing" the person's ability to engage in semiotic work, in which the person is

> . . . progressively creating new links that allow the absorption and the transformation of the pain into semiotic forms (Abraham & Torok, 1996; Tisseron, 1992). It involves necessarily a form of access to mnemonic traces, their further linking, their transformations and their possible fading out. Such linking and elaboration need to be intersubjectively acknowledged to take place (Green, 2000b; Tisseron, 2000). (Zittoun, 2004, p. 485)

(p.197) Other theoretical perspectives highlight specific means by which such re-semiotization might be achieved, for example, narratives of the traumatic past, often shared with others (Bar-On, 1991; Burnell, Coleman, & Hunt, 2011); pilgrimage (Murakami, 2007); and the visit of collective memory places (Edkins, 2003).

In what follows, we use our semiotic approach to imagination to explore how recognition and semiotic work can be restored in changing everyday situations, allowing new futures to emerge.

An Empirical Exploration: On Restoring Imagination

To explore the possibility of maintaining imagination open in sociocultural situations that threaten it in older adults' lives, we consider here an extreme case study: that of a traumatic experience. We show that the trauma constrains imagination in specific ways; we also show how, through time and changing situations, people can restore imagining and thus growth. One implication of such an observation would be that

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imagination can keep developing lifelong and should be cherished and supported in older age.

The Fukushima Accident

The following case has been collected by one of us (Tatsuya Sato) as part of a long-standing collaboration with survivors of the Fukushima accident in Japan.

On March 11, 2011, a major earthquake touched the Japanese coast in the area of Fukushima. The earthquake had two immediate consequences and one long-term consequence. First, the shock damaged the nearby atomic plant, leading to a radiation leak from one of the fusion reactors. Second, it provoked a tsunami that wiped out the coastal landscape, leaving a field of ruin and mud where before there were small agriculture and fishing villages. Survivors were relocated to provisionary camps nearby. The long-term consequence was that the atomic accident released huge amounts of radiation-contaminated waters. The region became highly radioactive, the crops unusable, and the fields too toxic for people to go back and rebuild their houses. A large population remained in provisionary camps, living as refugees in their own country, without clear support and rehousing from their government. This historical catastrophe ruptured the lives of a very large number of people. Villages were destroyed and people were killed by the tsunami, large zones of land and water were contaminated by the nuclear disaster, and thousands of people were displaced. People continue to live in temporary camps because they suffered from both these catastrophes (McCurry, 2016; Traer, 2016).

We propose to examine the role of imagination in older people in Fukushima. Rather than examining their “posttraumatic stress disorder” (American **(p.198)** Psychiatric Association, 2013), we propose to consider that one of the major challenges for these people is to make sense of their lives after the catastrophe (together with other changes), an idea referred to as “posttraumatic growth” (PTG). PTG describes the notion that people becoming stronger after experiencing a major trauma and can thus construct a more meaningful life after the tragedy (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

First Visit: Ms. S’s No Future

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On 7th July 2014, three years after the earthquake, a team of researchers (American and Japanese) visited the evacuee temporary housing at Fukushima City with one of us (Tatsuya Sato) (Figure 9.2a and b).

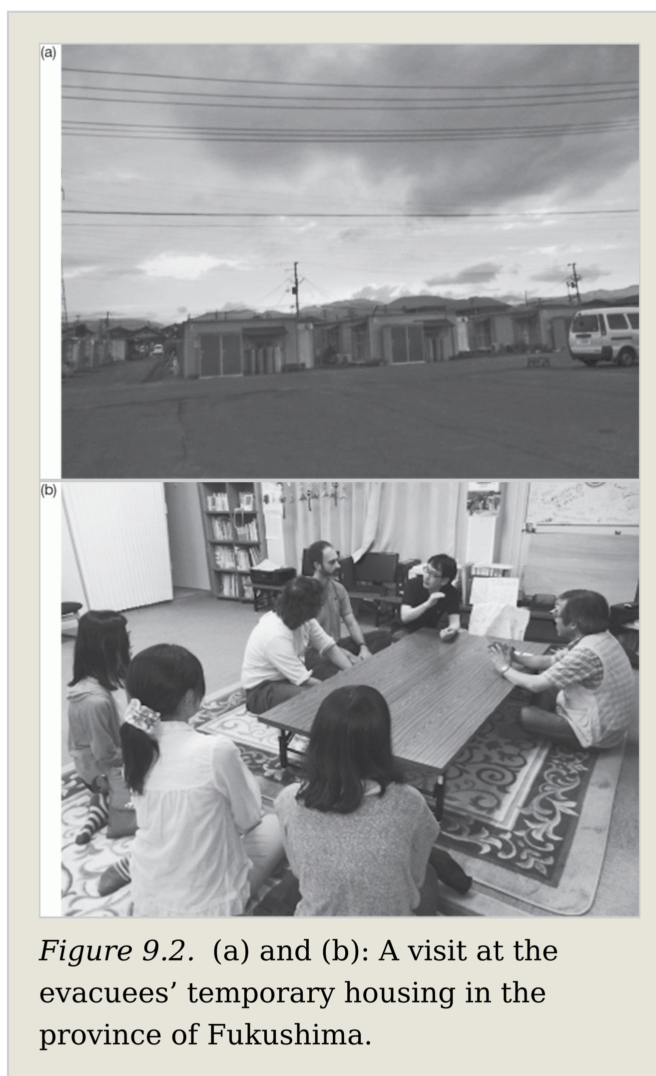

Figure 9.2. (a) and (b): A visit at the evacuees' temporary housing in the province of Fukushima.

After we interviewed Mr. K, the leader of those evacuated, he introduced the team to one woman, Ms. S, who lived in a temporary house for evacuees. She was kind enough to invite the team to her rooms in one container—her provisory housing. She was now in her 70s. Her husband had died before the earthquake. At the time of the disaster, she was living by herself. Her children had their own families outside of Fukushima.

After we took a photo of Ms. S and her family (Figure 9.3), she thanked the team. In fact, the researchers were afraid to be perceived as sudden and strange guests, invading her private sphere of experience. However, she said, "thank you for coming and thank you for not forgetting the Fukushima people." Of course, we expressed our thanks to her: "thank you for showing us the real life of evacuees." Exchanges of

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"thank you" thus established a bridge between Europeans and Japanese in Fukushima and allowed mutual recognition.

Figure 9.3. Ms. S and the team.

Then a picture on the wall caught our eye (Figure 9.4).[1] The picture represented men in white suits walking on a road. We could imagine that this photo focused on the rescue activities after the tsunami hit the ground and caused the explosion of the atomic plant. One of our colleagues asked Ms. S what the picture meant and why she was keeping the photo on the wall. She replied, "Because, it reminds me of my home town." How can we understand such an unexpected answer?

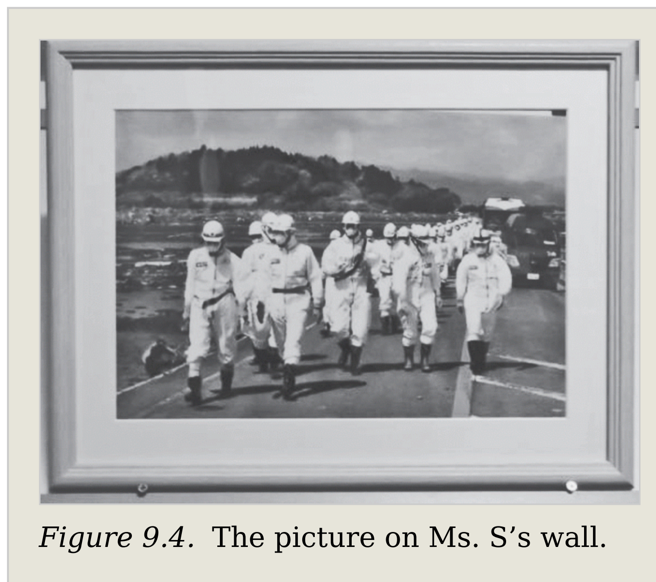

Figure 9.4. The picture on Ms. S's wall.

To understand how Ms. S made sense of the photo, it is worth remembering the famous scheme of "figure and ground" by the Danish psychologist Rubin. For most people, the picture appears first as representing a vase. Similarly, for us as guests, this photo showed a white-suited rescue team walking on a road. Puddles of water imply the tsunami, and white-suited men imply the poisonous radiation. In Rubin's picture, it

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is only in a second movement that one can see the profile of two characters (Figure 9.5).

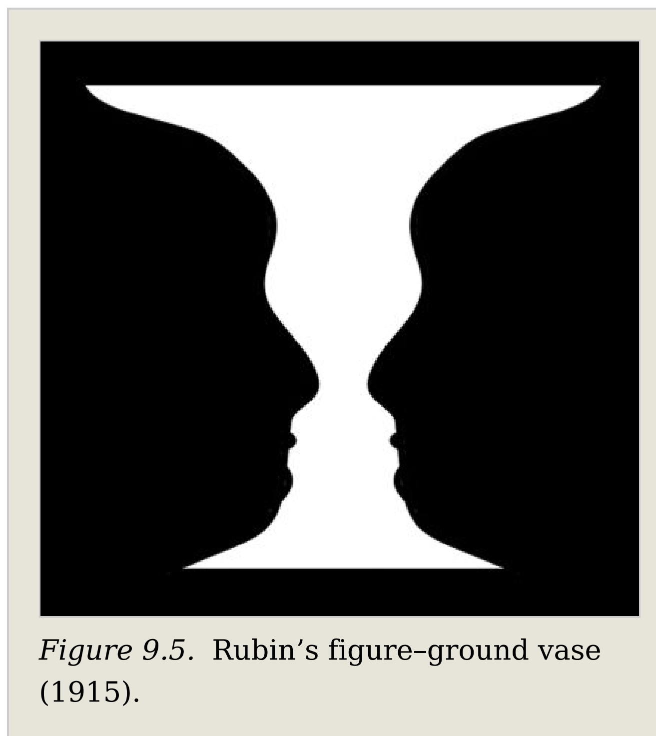

Figure 9.5. Rubin's figure–ground vase (1915).

In Ms. S's photo, it is in fact the small hill over the road that constitutes the figure of the picture for her. The white suits are only the ground for the hill as a figure. In relation to the ground, the figure is more impressive and dominant. Everything about the past is remembered better, and the figure brings to the fore more associations than the ground. As a rule there is a further difference when an area is seen as figure or as ground, in that when it is experienced as **(p.199)** figure, it is in general more impressive than when it is experienced as ground. It dominates consciousness; consequently in descriptions, the figure is usually mentioned before the ground. This small scene can be read through a semiotic, temporal perspective. In effect, we can say that, in this photo, at least two modes **(p.200)** **(p.201)** of time coexist, yet they exclude each other. The actual present of the disaster and the past of her home town cannot be seen simultaneously. If we focus on the here and now—rescuing teams and atomic contamination—the past becomes a ground. If we focus on the past—the life on the hill—the present becomes an immobile ground.

As recalled earlier, imagination can be seen as a semiotic, dynamically mediated process, by which we leave the immediate experience (here and now, shared social and material reality) to explore the past, future possibilities, or an alternative present (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011; Vygotsky, 1931; Zittoun, 2014; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013). In that sense, Ms. S's

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relation to the picture can be said to reflect the use of a pictorial resource to imagine. However, the picture allows imagining the past, cut off from the present. It seems that the present, represented by the white-suited men is ignored, or foreclosed. The traumatic event is ignored or considered as nonrelevant. In other terms, we could make the hypothesis that imagination is not reinjected in the present. Such impeded imagination, we propose, could be one of the manifestations of what is classically called trauma.

The questions therefore are: What future is possible for Ms. S as well as for other relocated persons? How can possible futures be elaborated, both at an individual level and at a collective one? In effect, it is relatively easy to recover from a natural disaster (Haas & Levasseur, 2013); it is more difficult to do so from a human-made disaster. The radiation will last over a personal life course, and there is no hope of restoring one's previous spheres of experience. The life course has been redefined by the rupture. What past remains, then, and what future is possible? The risk is to fall into a permanent present —the enduring, nonconnected present of the evacuee houses, forgotten by the government.

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(p.202) Second Visit: Ms. S's Imagination Restored

On September 13, 2014, we (one of us, Tatsuya Sato, together with a team of researchers and students) revisited the evacuees' temporary houses at Fukushima City. We met Ms. S again, and as she had done the previous time, she invited us to see her rooms. One of us (Tatsuya Sato) talked with her and found a family Buddhist altar with three photos, so we prayed for her husband and her parents-in-law. We also found some boxes and asked her what they were. The answer was a little shocking: these were containers of cinerary urns (骨壺). She told that she had brought cinerary urns from the catastrophically destroyed graveyard near the seashore where she had lived before the tsunami. She delightedly continued to say that a new graveyard would be constructed on the hill. It is precisely that hill that appears in the picture with the men in white suits.

Retrospectively, it appears that the destruction of the village graveyard was a problem of major importance for the evacuees from Ms. S's town (to the point that Tatsuya Sato was once asked by one evacuee to watch the ruined graveyard and clean it up when he would visit it). The news that the graveyard would be reconstructed was very welcome by the evacuees. More specifically, it also allowed Ms. S to imagine a future again. In other terms, rendering possible the evacuee's relation to her personal and collective past—restoring a graveyard—allowed her to open alternative futures. The restoration of the past, in turn, allowed Ms. S to acknowledge the reality of the tsunami, of her actual present, as well as her future. The enduring present—the posttrauma stasis—is reconnected to time, past and future, and hence, paradoxically, becomes more real.

Generalizing: Imagination and Posttraumatic Growth

In this vignette, we observed two main modalities of imagining. First, we identified a foreclosed imagination of what has happened (or post factum) that does nor reconnect to the present. This half-loop is typical of trauma—past is explored with no connection to present, itself denied in its actuality. Second, we identified a full-looped imagination, joining past and future alternatives. In this sense, trauma can be seen as the disjunction between post hoc imagination and future imagination. In contrast, recovery form trauma demands to reconnect imagination of the past and that of the

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future, which are both relevant in the making of a person's life course *as far as they enrich each other*.

A change in the dialogical situation for imagining transformed the situation, first through social recognition (by the authorities of the loss of the cemetery, and perhaps by the visitors as well) and second by allowing people to recover the material elements that would become resources for imagining —the urns of the deceased. This allowed the survivors to recover cultural ways to honor the dead, supporting the associated imaginary dialogues (Josephs, 1998). In other terms, trauma is worked through, or re-semiotized, by the restored movement **(p.203)** of imagination. Imagination is facilitated by both recognition and material resources that have cultural meaning and is, in this sense, the process by which PTG occurs.

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Conclusion

In this chapter, we address imagination in the life course and, especially, in older adults. We reviewed the literature on aging, which focuses on the importance of sense making and on keeping life possibilities open. We also drew from a model of imagination as a loop, which allows seeing how and in what condition people can define alternative presents and possible futures. In our reading, many of the processes and challenges that have been highlighted as part of aging can be understood as variations of imagination and its impossibilities. Hence, the so-called wisdom that can develop with age, personal life philosophies, or narrative openness depends on imagination. Conversely, narrative foreclosure and trauma can also be understood as limited or constrained modalities of imagining. From a sociocultural perspective, these limitations of imagining have to be understood dialogically: it might be mainly because the social and cultural conditions do not allow people to think beyond the present that they do not imagine.

Hence, one of the specific challenges of aging is that people's zone of free movement (Valsiner, 1998) is limited de facto, many areas of the social life being are closed to them, not to speak of material limitations in cases of loss of mobility. Also, the negative social representations of aging, the lack of social recognition, and even the lack of vocabulary to designate development and growth in adult life may be part of some people's difficulties with thinking ahead or imagining their life options as older adults. On the other side, we have seen the extreme case of trauma in the life of an older woman—a major disruption of her life course, leaving very little room for imagining the future. We proposed to see trauma as an expression of a limitation of imagination, which engages in a foreclosed past, without connection back in the present. Here, we also have suggested that social recognition, allowing the person to find meaningful resources and to draw on cultural resources, may have allowed imagination to redeploy and growth to be restarted. Of course, although this reading is suggested by our theoretical understanding, the empirical case is very modest, and our abductive movement does not yet allow further generalization.

We conclude, therefore, on an exploratory hypothesis, based on the reviewed body of literature and on the case study presented, suggesting that imagination may well occur lifelong yet may be at risk in situations usually considered as

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traumatic. We also suggest that social and cultural conditions by which imagination may be preserved should be encouraged in old age and in disrupting experiences. Of course, the specificities of the conditions that threaten or support imagination in old age or in traumatic situations demand further exploration. We believe that society at large has a responsibility to create the conditions that would allow people to be able to draw on their past experiences and use various resources in the **(p.204)** present in order to imagine alternative presents and futures that dialogically will enrich their lives.

Note

(1.) This photo was taken by Shigeyuki Takagi. He is an engineer and an amateur photographer who was born in Namie town, Fukushima prefecture. https://plus.google.com/113329282843161302939/

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Notes:

(1.) This photo was taken by Shigeyuki Takagi. He is an engineer and an amateur photographer who was born in Namie town, Fukushima prefecture. https://plus.google.com/113329282843161302939/

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