The role of responsiveness within the self in transitions to university

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The role of "responsiveness" within the self in transitions to university

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Abstract

Entering university is a complex psychosocial phenomenon that can create several new stressful situations that students need to face. The transition into university may be accompanied by some psychosocial problems such as reduced self-esteem and academic achievement, increased social anxiety, and a critical rise in the probability of dropout. How does a person use cultural elements to cope with stress? Responding to this question requires an understanding of the multivocal and ambivalent self. The paper aims at introducing and discussing the concept of Educational Self and the role of the responsiveness for explaining the complexity of the transition to a new educational context in Cultural Psychology perspective. The notion of responsiveness plays a crucial role in the "reconfiguration" of the multivocal and ambivalent self in transition.

Keywords

Transition to university, coping, Educational Self, responsiveness, Bakhtin

University academic life is one of the most important dimensions in the developmental trajectory of a young person. Transition to university requires a range of student competencies for academic adjustment and school success (Almeida, 2007). Transitions entail changes in school culture, increased academic demands, and shifts in peer groups, which may be hard to negotiate (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990).

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These aspects are very similar to those seen in the research about the contextual factors related to student transitional difficulties in early education (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2007).

These school transitions have been recognized as constituting one of the most important moments in the students' life (Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2007), especially for those who are at risk[1] (Anderson et al., 2000). Transition may be accompanied by some psychosocial problems such as reduced self-esteem and academic achievement (Mizelle, 1995), increased social anxiety, and a critical rise in the probability of dropout (Tilleczek et al., 2011). Such transitions may involve the transformation of identities, through both one's own emergence[2] and the mediation of others. It is, therefore, important to investigate how students deal with the inherent difficulties in entering university. The university appears as a cultural arena where belongings and new identity positioning activated by dialogical processes meet. Thus, the higher educational system is a developmental context where significant transitions in the student's life take place. These transitional phases involve affective, cognitive, and social changes. Entering the university academic life is not just a matter of dealing with a new social setting, rather it has more to do with a process of identity repositioning, cultural relocation, and new meaning construction (Zittoun, 2006).

In addition, what makes the transition to university different from the previous ones a student passed through his/her life is the new relevance assumed by the projection of the self in the unknown future. The "imagined self" in the future implies to cope with the uncertainty of the next steps in the life course trajectory which was less prominent in the previous educational transitions (Cortés, 2016).

Zittoun's (2006) transition analysis in education considers the individuals' uniqueness (the dynamic and dialoguing thoughts, feelings, wishes, memories, which constitute the sense of self), a basic need for self-continuity and consistency. The individual faces repositioning and relocation in their social and symbolic fields and often uses cultural elements and symbolic resources to deal with this kind of situation. According to Zittoun (2006), symbolic resources are cultural elements (books, songs, movies, and others) that a person always uses intentionally, although not necessarily consciously. The semiotic function of the uses of symbolic resources presupposes a link between the meaning content of such resources and aspects of the socially shared reality. These may participate in the making of meaning that an individual confers on their human experience.

Transition into university

In order to answer the main question of this article: "How does a person use cultural elements to cope with stress?," we use, as a starting point, the study of Märtsin, Chang, and Obst's (2016) that provides a methodological and conceptual link between the traditional transactional model about coping with stress into university and the Semiotic Cultural Psychology. Yet, the paper shows a gap in how researchers address the problem of coping with stress due to the use of dichotomous

response patterns: problem-focused coping strategies and emotion-focused coping strategies. We argue that the conceptual tools provided by this study will be further developed by taking into the account the role of ambivalence and responsiveness[3] in the process of coping with stress in transitional phases.

Märtsin et al. (2016) discuss the role of cultural resource in the process of coping with stress, by examining, through a quantitative study, how first year undergraduate students used cultural elements and activities to aid their transition into university. The justification of the study is based on an understanding that young people entering university tackle important changes, such as a new social life, changes related to academic achievement, and other adjustments. From this point of view, the authors explore how students manage stress and use cultural elements when entering university, based on the transactional model of stress and coping and aspects of Cultural Psychology.

By starting from the vast literature on coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985), Märtsin et al. (2016) explain the differences between the strategies used to face stressful situations based on the model of problem-focused coping strategies, in which efforts are directed toward the problem that causes stress (e.g. confrontation, seeking social support, planned problem solving), and emotion-focused coping strategies, in which their efforts are directed toward managing the emotions arising from stress (e.g. distancing, self-controlling, positive reappraisal, avoidance). These transactional model strategies were used to define the main categories for their data analysis—"withdrawal" (emotion-focused coping) and "engagement" (problem-focused coping). Although they placed their work in the Cultural Psychology perspective (Marsico, 2015a) and referred to some concepts like *semiotic mediation* and *symbolic resources*, the data analysis was mainly built on the transactional model of stress and coping.

The authors aimed at examining the kinds of cultural elements and activities students use, and how they use these to aid their transition into university, through the concepts of semiotic mediation, symbolic resources, linking the use of culture and coping strategies, and examining how cultural elements and activities can function as important resources in the process of coping with stress. They found that the process-oriented model leads to the identification of patterns in which people fluctuate between withdrawal and different forms of engagement to support and facilitate their personal growth and development.

Coping with stress as a cultural activity

People relate to others, face stressful situations in their lives, and build ways to respond them, according to their experiences, and to the meanings learnt or constructed along the life trajectory. Entering university is a complex psychosocial phenomenon that can create several new stressful situations that students need to face. They are called to respond to them and will do it more or less actively.

According to Märtsin et al. (2016), both ways of using culture identified in their research, that is, "withdrawal" and "engagement," were conscious efforts to cope

with the situation. This idea of using consciousness to deal with cultural elements in transition is aligned with Zittoun's (2006) perspective.

The two categories identified are often found together, although one may appear more frequently than the other. One of the participants of Märtsin et al. (2016, p. 288) study claimed that he chose to watch TV "as a relaxation and personal learning tool or social interaction opportunity." In the author's analysis this may indicate engagement to reduce stress. We argue that this does not necessarily mean that this student had a better way of coping with stress than those within the withdrawal group. If another student watched TV to escape from university stress, to get away from it for a moment, this could be an equal possible fruitful way of solving problems related to stress. Even if he/she don't be explicitly working upon the university stress, he/she can return to it again later on in a very different way and in a different mood. For example, one student answered about watching TV to cope with stress and said that "trying to guess where the story line is going takes my mind away from reality into this fictional world where anything is possible but there is always a happy ending eventually" (p. 288). For Märtsin et al. (2016) this example refers to an attempt to temporarily withdraw from a stressful situation. Nevertheless, this referred idea of "anything is possible but there is always a happy ending eventually" (p. 288) indicates one imaginary internal process that has effects in his/her psychological ways of coping with stress. In other words "hoping a better end" can be somehow helpful for him/her. The quality of the response is so important as well as the feelings, ideas, and attitudes related to it. One may watch TV after a stressful moment and say that he/she "is doing it to escape the university." This could be seen as an example of coping with stress through withdrawal. However, over one's life history, watching a favorite TV program for a moment may be an effective way of having later insights and being able to solve one's problems. So coping process is not only about withdrawal or engagement but it can have both characteristics at the same time.

In relation to the two main coping strategies identified: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping, according to Gillespie and Zittoun (2010), it may be useful to consider the distinction between visible and invisible mediation points in any intentional use of culture. That is, the students' responses to the categories "withdrawal" and "engagement" reveal what they said about their first year of university. Thus, we can understand what they did, what cultural elements they used to cope with stress, and what were the outcomes when these were used in stressful situations.

However, more information is required in order to discover how using cultural elements and symbolic resources to cope with stress is related to personal perspectives of the self. In their study, Märtsin et al. (2016) found that in the case of "engagement" there was an attempt to actively do something about the difficult situation, while in the case of "withdrawal," there was a conscious decision to temporarily set aside the situation and related thoughts and feelings, and not deal with them. Nevertheless, "Watching TV" may, for example, be a coping behavior that relates to both "withdrawal" and "engagement" within the self in order to solve the stressful situation, by using visible and invisible, or conscious and unconscious, mediation.

The self in the educational context

Youth is defined as a period in which an individual defines a time perspective, an orientation system, and the spheres of experience in which these may be realized through multiple transitions (Marsico, 2015b). These are the foundations of meaning-making, which, according to Valsiner (2014), are necessary for identity transformation and learning. Hence, we may assert that, within the current sphere of educational contexts, a system of orientation may be based on responses constructed for others and for past situations, but always oriented toward the future.

Here the notion of the *Educational Self* (Iannaccone, Marsico, & Tateo, 2013) that is the specific dimension of the self elaborated in the context of the person's educational life offers a conceptual armamentarium for understanding how the experiences made in the educational contexts contribute to emerge and definition of the self. The construct of *Educational Self* can account both for the value-guided internalization of the possible future selves and the value-guided actualization of the existing students' selves. According to Iannaccone et al. (2013), the *Educational Self* is a legacy of symbolic resources built from knowledge, beliefs, narratives, and affective states established during one's personal educational trajectory. Understanding the idea of the *Educational Self* involves the notion that students participating in educational activities gradually internalize and appropriate signs, learning to manage them in order to formulate, regulate, and reflect on the self.

However, it is interesting to note that, although academic achievement is recognized as a crucial factor in schooling, the relationships within the school (with peer, professors, parents) precede and mediate the entire teaching–learning process (Marsico, 2012). In any stressful situation, we find outer and inner voices. The function of "responsiveness" is considered a constitutive element for the processes of communication thorough cultural dialogical processes. Responsiveness is a concept inspired by the theoretical perspective of Bakhtin and his Circle but is our own elaboration of the notion of responsibility. Although it is already used by some researchers as Menegassi (2009) and Sobral (2008), it is not the exact translation of "otvechaemost" of Bakhtin's writings in Russian (cf. note 3). According to Bakhtin's (1997, p. 291) perspective on communication: "any understanding of live speech [...] is inherently responsive. Any understanding is imbued with a response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker." Dialogic processes therefore control the entire response of people facing challenging situations, through interaction with others, constructed positions, and the consequences for the self within one's own social spheres.

The role of responsiveness

The dialogical self can be conceived as a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the society of mind. As a "mini-society," the self emerges from an intense interconnection with the (social) environment and is intrinsically bound to particular positions in time and space (Hermans, 2002). For example, we occupy different positions created in different contexts (I-student, I-mother, I-son, I-worker, etc.).

All these positions are associated with anyone in any context and work as a responsive structure. Although you go to a new school, your I-position "I-student," which has already been constructed, will reappear with responses to the internalized voices of peers, teachers, parents, and others with whom one previously lived. For this reason, people in new contexts are constantly challenged to deal with new positions that relate to new significant social others, which may unbalance the continuity of the dialogical self, presenting them with other perspectives, new viewpoints, and other points of reference in a new institution.

Students play an active role in their educational process, taking into consideration how they organize their dialogical structure to respond to the several voices in their everyday interactions, given that their positions relate to these voices and define who they are. It is assumed as a prerogative that the word is addressed to another, who is expected to respond (Menegassi, 2009). According to Bakhtin (1986, p. 94), "from the very beginning, the speaker expects a response [...] an active responsive understanding. The entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering this response." The structure of these responses relates to other voices within the school and can be understood as a fundamental condition for the establishment of the *Educational Self*. A student's responsiveness to other voices can therefore tell us a great deal about their developing identity.

According to Bakhtin and Volochinov (1992), the statement addressed to the other as a response is not only the act of one person responding to another, but also a response to other statements circulating in society, because he or she is immersed in a culture or shared system of voices. For Menegassi (2009), inner speech is based on the relationship with others and results from internalization and the reconstruction of the social practices in which the subject takes part, throughout their existence.

According to Bakhtin (1981; Fecho, Collier, Friese, & Wilson, 2010), utterance, response, and meaning—the building blocks of dialog—are merged within a transactional process. There can be no meaning without response. There can be no response without future response. Everybody who engages in language use is linked by all past, current, and future responses. As well as its psychological nature, this concept is described by Bakhtin and his Circle as social and historical: the subject of language, the subject of speech, is an agent—or rather an "interacting" being (Sobral, 2008). The subjective processes of responsiveness are due to a need to say something to somebody in the self-field, even if this is silent to outsiders. These words are configured under the coercion of mutually established social relations (Bakhtin & Volochinov, 1992).

Concluding remarks: Responsiveness, educational contexts, and coping

Inner speech indicates the construction of a standard of responsiveness established as internal—a responsive structure for significant others in different contexts—and the student responds to others in educational contexts according to this responsive

structure. In the self, a person creates a way of responding to circumstances in their life and one attitude may involve several values and positions (Dazzani & Marsico, 2013). For example, "escaping" from university in a stressful moment to walk on the streets may be a way of avoiding a bad situation, but it is also a learnt activity for relaxing that allows the students to be ready to solve their problems later on, although they are not totally conscious of this. Their answer to stressful situations works through withdrawal and engagement, that is, they have the intention of moving away from the university for a moment; however, this promotes a better physical and psychological state for coping with stress later. This ambivalence may be their standard of responsiveness in educational contexts when coping with stress.

For Märtsin et al. (2016), it is necessary to develop process-oriented models of coping that enable the identification of patterns in the ways people fluctuate between withdrawal and engagement which support and facilitate their personal growth and development. How does a person use cultural elements to cope with stress? Responding to this question requires an understanding of the multivocal and ambivalent self, because of the multiple experiences and responses one has lived throughout one's life. At the same time, when coping with stress, we might implement actions that are partly withdrawal and partly engagement.

Young people have some experience of life, a history of past ruptures, and possibly a memory of past transitions. For this reason, they develop certain skills or knowledge that may become resources. That is, young people in transition use symbolic resources to face up to everyday challenges as stressful situations. Our memories are invited to help us to find solutions that are mostly constructed through a synthesis of the responses we have made to other situations in our lives and our always future-oriented conduct (Marsico, 2015c; Marsico & Valsiner, 2016). Furthermore, cultural elements may be utilized to maintain or transform interpersonal relationships. In fact, in learning and teaching situations, interpersonal relationships create the symbolic object of knowledge, which in turn justifies and modifies the relationship (Dazzani, 2016; Zittoun, 2006).

It is important to note that the use of symbolic resources within relationships may be focused on the person or on the object. However, we stress that understanding the better uses of cultural elements or symbolic resources involves the individual's relationship with him or herself, through a personal process built according to responses mainly structured in critical situations with significant others within the academic life. Here the notion of responsiveness plays a crucial role in the "reconfiguration" of the multivocal and ambivalent self in transition and opens up new possibility for a further research plan not only in the context of transitions to university or in relation to the "educational trajectories" at large, but also in more general stressful situations or other transitional phases.

Authors' note

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. As observed in the Early School Leavers Study (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005), an at-risk young person is unlikely to progress to graduation with the skills and self-confidence necessary for meaningful options in the areas of work, culture, or even social relationships.
2. According to Zittoun (2012) emergence is the possibility to distance self from others and oneself. It makes every human experience uniquely new.
3. The notion of responsiveness we adopt is similar but not the same of Bakhtin's "otvetst-vennost" which means "responsibility" and, more precisely, "readiness to answer from a responsible standpoint." Responsiveness, instead, would be better translated in Russian as "otvechaemost" that implies a demand to respond to some statement. Here the focus is more on the obligation to respond without a specific implication in terms of responsibility. In this paper, we do not use the terms responsiveness as a direct descendence of Bakhtin, but in parallel with his theoretical perspective.

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