

Pathways to life course changes: Introducing the concept of Avenues of Directive Meaning

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Abstract

The concept of Avenues of Directive Meaning is proposed as a notion for understanding the development of trajectories that map psychological phenomenon in their temporal unfolding. This notion aims to include personal constructed meanings as they interact with the directions offered by the sociocultural environment. Focusing on the notion of equipotentiality – introduced by the embryologist Hans Driesch at the turn of the 20th-century – we apply it to the meanings constructed by persons as they set up equifinality points in their life courses. We illustrate the Avenues of Directive Meaning notion through the analysis of two couples that decided to adopt a child in the contemporary Brazilian context.

Keywords

Avenues of Directive Meaning, equipotentiality, life course, developmental trajectories, adoption

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Human beings develop life trajectories through interacting with their sociocultural environment. This idea is accepted by all classical researchers that support an interactional perspective linking human development with the specific milieu in which it emerges and grows, such as Baldwin, James, Mead and Vygotsky to name but a few. To investigate these interactions, we start by conceptualizing the role of humans as meaning-makers and the sociocultural environment as offering some possibilities and not others, in specific times and places. We focus on a person's meaning construction in relation to a goal they strive for within societal organization.¹ These meanings result from the linkage between personal history and the possibilities available in society. We call the trajectories that emerge from these two reference points Avenues of Directive Meanings (ADM). In this paper, we contrast ADM to life course trajectories – such as the life span (Baltes, 1987) and life course trajectories used in sociological studies (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2004) – which are based on individual constructions conceived and abstracted from the analysis of large samples. In these approaches, groups exist in themselves and developmental changes are from outcome to outcome. In contrast, ADM comprise a simultaneously personal and social construct. It implies socially suggested life courses with a focus on the dynamics that create personal meanings in a person's interaction with his/her sociocultural milieu.

In recent decades, Sato and collaborators (Sato, Hidaka, & Fukuda, 2009; Sato, Mori & Valsiner, 2016) have proposed an emerging approach to developmental trajectories called the Trajectory Equifinality Approach (TEA). It offers a method to trace developmental trajectories – TEM (Trajectory Equifinality Model) – that is particularly applicable to analyses of developmental processes (Sato & Valsiner, 2010). This method focuses on equifinality points and bifurcation points as major conceptual anchors. Relying on the notion of the irreversibility of time, it highlights the diversity of possible trajectories to achieve the equifinality point – that is, the ways in which the same final end state is arrived at using diverse alternative pathways.² TEM also includes imagination as having a central role in the process of constructing a trajectory. In term of methods, it relies on mainly qualitative landmarks obtained from retrospective methods (interviews, diaries, etc.) in order to highlight bifurcation points in a life trajectory and to grasp the possibilities imagined but not realized. In the words of Zittoun and Valsiner (2016):

TEM gives us an opportunity to put the real (lived-through) and non-real (imagined – but personally important) life-course events into the same functional scheme. Imagination becomes real – and “the real” acquires new value through imagination. (p. 06)

Using this model, Bastos (2016) has pointed out the role of imagination as developing hidden trajectories – “shadow trajectories” as she calls them – such as the career considered but not followed. These exist in parallel with a chosen trajectory as it develops, interacting with it throughout one's life.

Although a fruitful new concept, it relies mainly on subject's choices, evident at bifurcation points in one's trajectory – the points in which diverse possible

trajectories are feasible. Like TEM, narrative interviews, autobiographies, or diaries are the main sources of information used to access the developmental trajectory accomplished. This is problematic because reconstructions of the past are done on the basis of present concerns and future challenges (Bartlett, 1995/1932). The process through which people construct meanings for their actions requires studying them as they occur at each equifinality point, rather than looking back at them from a later equifinality point (Jensen & Wagoner, 2016).

Additionally, the organization of the specific sociocultural environment in which the person develops requires close examination. From this perspective, the present ADM approach can be seen to complement TEM, emphasizing a person's meaning-making processes and a closer examination of the societal-collective meanings available in specific contexts and at specific times, as well as the various social constraints found there. Methodologically, ADM requires a follow-up period for exploring how their account given in interviews changes as their life changes, due to the reconstructive character of memory (Bartlett, 1995/1932; Wagoner, 2017).³

The term "avenues" builds on the general conceptual metaphor of "Life as a Journey" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), as used in Robert Frost's poem "The road not taken". The specific use of "avenues" was chosen due to its spatial and temporal possibilities and constraints. The spatial side of the idea implies following a route already organized by societal meanings present in diverse social messages, social norms, and a person's conduct. These cluster together into configurations that take the form of an avenue, guiding the person in his/her construction of personal meanings for life decisions and actions. These meanings emerge through an interaction with these socially pre-structured routes that people travel to reach their goals. Navigating in these avenues comprises a dynamic and embodied movement through time, as for example when a person travels from home to some other place (e.g. a new city). This requires beginning and end points, as well as the journey or trajectory between them. In this sense, "Avenues of Directive Meaning" exhibit spatial, temporal and embodied analogical dimensions that establish conceptual likenesses to life course trajectories. Additionally, we think that these avenues of clustered meaning, existing at a specific social place and time, continue guiding personal meaning construction even after the aimed for goal is reached. The use of the term "Directive Meaning" highlights how societal meanings guide and modulate personal meaning construction that in turn guides their emerging trajectory or trajectories.

To illustrate this process, this paper draws on a study of two Brazilian couples from the moment they decide to adopt a child, investigating the trajectories they construct during the two months after their decision. We take the couple's meaning making as our unit of analysis in relation to the wider meanings available in their specific social milieu. We aim to highlight both the role of *the meaning these couples attribute to their decision to "adopt a child"* and the *societal meanings and constraints circulating around adoption in Brazil*, as will be shown. The combination of these two meaning sets guides the construction of the couples' trajectories. Thus,

our approach focuses on the interaction between couples' personal meaning construction, regarding the adoption of a child, and the available meanings circulating in society about adoption. The concept of ADM allows the analysis of couple's trajectory (or trajectories) towards an equifinality point that is revealed from an analysis of how couple's meaning construction exhibits an interaction between their personal history and the available meanings offered to them by their social-cultural context.

Persons as meaning-makers in development: Insights from embryology

All developmental processes of living organisms – biological, sociological, psychological, political and historical – are multiple due to their self-generative (auto-poietic) character that leads to increasing variability. However, within the variability of possible trajectories, all developing organisms achieve the same equifinality point as a species specific final form (Driesch, 1899; Zittoun & Valsiner, 2016). Moreover, life trajectories are unique for each person due to the novelty emerging through the particular way in which they interact with the environment through time; these interactions construct their unique, irreversible, historical development (Lyra & Valsiner, 2011). From the standpoint of cultural psychology, human developmental processes are over-determined by meanings (Obeyesekere, 1981, 1990) which are subjective achievements existing as personal constructions that define psychological dynamics. Nevertheless, the person's meaning making is a cultural process that is based on sign activity rooted in the collective environment (Valsiner, 2014). Consequently, to trace developmental trajectories focusing on psychological development requires a consideration of what meanings human beings assign to the task to be accomplished, its equifinality point. In the following cases, we illustrate this point through the meaning of adopting a child for two different couples.

The meaning the subject assigns to the task predisposes the person to choose some possibilities above others – for example, a religious person that conceives of marriage as a sacred, indissoluble union can accept suffering in his marriage and may even feel happy. Another example can be found in the need to some woman to find a husband “before she becomes too old” to feel accepted by society – still evident today in Brazilian context. We see that in the first case the person's life trajectory will never include divorce, as long as the meaning of it does not change. In the second case, the constant search for a husband through friends, internet sites or any other available means will shape these woman's trajectories until they find a husband. Thus, to focus on the meanings people give to the task to be achieved in the future (equifinality point) highlights a past–present–future framework that conceives of human beings as goal-oriented agents.

Having established the basics of our approach, we can compare it to Hans Driesch's (1899) seminal work on embryology, particularly as elaborated by

Valsiner (2017) in his paper on the characteristics of self-completing wholes. Based in his studies in embryology, his work defends properties assigned to wholes that allow them to develop towards their final forms, in spite of disturbing conditions. He discovered that the development of the *Asterias glacialis* when disturbed through cutting into halves at the gastrula stage, an early stage of cellular multiplication, results in development of normal final forms but of a smaller size. These studies gave support for the *equipotentiality* of the wholes striving in their developmental trajectories toward a final form (equifinality point). In other terms, each cell has the potential to develop into the end form of its species. This tendency is a movement towards the construction of the whole, a holistic causality operating at the present time towards the future of the developing organism. Driesch (1899) also proposed that this happens through regulatory mechanisms establishing a tied connection between equifinality – that leads to the final form through diverse pathways – and equipotentiality. They belong to the same framework, depending on the time orientation we are dealing with. If the focus is on the present state and the future end state, we should talk about the potential energy of these wholes – equipotentiality. If the focus is on the future end form the concern is with equifinality.

In our analysis, we elaborate on the specific meaning the person assigns to the task to be achieved, i.e. the equipotential character of meaning. From the perspective of cultural psychology (Valsiner, 2007), it is worth noting that this aspect has not yet been emphasized in studying life trajectories. It is in human beings' constant construction of meaning that personal and collective culture connect (Valsiner, 2014). Moreover, meaning is of developmental importance as it implies a prospective orientation. People prepare to face possible futures, regulating the interactions with the societal possibilities available at a specific time and place. The guiding function of meaning prepares the person to develop toward the goal to be achieved – or deviate from it finding a different meaning – and, by this carries equipotentiality. Meaning assigned to the life course carries the strength to lead the person towards the aim assigned to the developmental trajectory (or trajectories) encapsulated or captured by the meaning. Conceived as such, we can establish an analogy with Hans Driesch's embryology.⁴

Personal meanings interacting with the possibilities available in the sociocultural environment construct ADM. In contrast to the personal life course trajectory, we introduce this parallel notion for socially suggested life courses. ADM emerge as a result of people's personal meaning, based on their life history, and the societal blueprints that suggest directions for moving towards equifinality points. In our present illustration of adoption, the equifinality point is to have a child. These avenues may have different priorities. For example, giving natural birth may be prioritized in most societies while adoption may be accepted as a second possibility. Adoption may be prioritized in periods after disasters and war in which a great number of children are orphaned. Yet all societies may rule out the technically possible avenue of "stealing a child". These ADM need to be identified through the

analysis of the context in which the particular phenomenon is investigated (Figueirêdo, 2009; Fonsêca, 2006, 2011).⁵

Our illustration of the equipotentiality of the meaning attributed to the goal to be achieved is demonstrated in this paper by examining the specific meaning of adopting a child. This meaning differs for each of the two couples investigated. For one couple to adopt a child is a mission determined by “*God’s will*” while for the other it is “*to become parents*”. These meanings exhibit the power of a totality that strives to be accomplished, through one or diverse trajectories; thus, more than one trajectory can emerge concomitantly. This couple’s interaction with societal organization takes place according to the characteristics of the guiding meaning. For instance, we can guess that the couple, who understands adopting a child as “*God’s will*,” will accept any child offered to them, including being inscribed at the Brazilian Register of Adoption – BRA (Portuguese: *Cadastro Nacional de Adoção*) – the official way of adopting in Brazil that prohibits any other form of adoption. The other couple, to whose meaning is simply “*to become parents*”, will also be inscribed in the BRA. But, at the same time, they will search and “choose” a child; after having found a child they will persist in trying to get him or her.

Adoption in contemporary Brazil: An arena to study human developmental trajectories

In contemporary Brazil, to adopt a child or an adolescent the person (or the couple) needs to be subscribed in the BRA. Brazilian law regulating adoption came into effect in 2009⁶ and established a legal and public status to adoption. This law considers illegal any adoption accomplished outside the list comprised by this register. On the one side, this new public domain can protect the children from a private domain that can lead to types of adoption that use the child for purpose of house workers and even to harm the child through abuse of diverse orders, but on the other the legal and public status break old practices of circulation of children within the mother’s parenthood and social community (Figueirêdo, 2009). A change in societal customs does not necessarily follow from a change in law. Thus, it needs to be evaluated inside the network of meanings and actions that compose society.

Every law is the result of some political demand and it establishes a contract between partners, between persons or between persons, and some legal entity. The law of adoption carries the definitive transference of parent legal power to the State that then has the legal power to transfer it to another couple or person – in general it is a mother that gives up her parental power but a couple can also do so. The State can also remove the parental legal power. This law was built with European nuclear family in mind, particularly of a middle-class heterosexual couple responsible for the raising of children (Fonsêca, 2006, 2011). However, in poor environments it is much more common that a child be raised by other members of the family for a portion of the time, and in most cases later returned to his/her biological mother. Thus, child rearing is distributed between relatives and even members of the same community. In

fact, the circulation of children within a community is still currently alive in Brazil, mainly in poor environments (Fonsêca, 2006).

Fonsêca (2006) describes the circulation of children as the “Brazilian style of adoption” (*adoção “à brasileira”*) in which she highlights the functional value of these networks, the social role of relatives and community members, the strong power of family bonds and solid ties in raising the child. The relatives and the community participate in the support of mothers that are unable to raise their children. In these conditions, mothers mention affective bonds as the most important aspect (Fonsêca, 2006). Moreover, children accept having more than one mother as normal and may even be proud of having two or three of them. Nevertheless, there is not always a smooth relationship between biological and surrogate mothers: Conflicts are not uncommon. One interesting point is that the biological mother knows who is raising his/her child and thus often knows what is happening with his/her child and may even have the possibility of recovering the child in the future. The term “adoption,” common among the Brazilians middle class, is actually not used by the poor. In poor communities, the relationship between substituted fathers and their daughters and sons is translated in verbs like “to raise” (Portuguese: *criar*), “taking care” (Portuguese: *tomar conta*) and/or variants of these verbs. In other words, “. . .the emphasis is on the bond, not on the autonomous individual” (Fonsêca, 2006, p. 20). Another point to consider is that for a mother to give his/her baby up for legal adoption is also to give up the possibilities of continuation of her cultural history, that is the continuity of her family bonds (Fonsêca, 2006, 2011).

The above conditions contrast to the legal route to adopt in contemporary Brazil, which is rooted in formal legislation. In fact, we consider this law as giving adoption a place of recognition, and, consequently, of more public acceptance by the society and by families formed through adoption. Moreover, it protects the child from possible harm, such as the selling of children. Nevertheless, for mothers the involvement with diverse professionals – psychologists, social attendants, judges, etc. – required by the legal process of adoption, makes it feel impersonal and lacking in affective bonds. Fonsêca (2006) says that this fact is referred to by the mothers from poor communities favoring the “Brazilian style of adoption,” in which they feel more comfortable.

One word should be said to the religious fervor of saving the child abandoned and finding a family for these children. We consider that this religious influence can be found in both legal and illegal forms of adoption. The “Brazilian style of adoption” can encompass this religious feeling assigned to help a mother that is not able to raise her/his baby and conversely, to give a child a family. However, activists in favor of legal adoption can also be motivated by a religious fervor of saving the child from abuse, believing that under the law these children will be protected from suffering at the hands of malicious persons that will exploit them.

In summary, contemporary Brazilian society offers the opportunity to explore how the decision to adopt a child can lead to conflicts between the “Brazilian style of adoption” and the changes introduced by the control the state through the new

law of adoption in 2009. To trace personal trajectories within these conflicting possibilities we rely on the equifinality point – to have a child. Nevertheless, the choice of diverse trajectories depends on the meaning of adoption or more specifically what is the meaning of the decision to have a child for the specific person – or couple – studied. These meanings are diverse for each person (or couple). The variability results in diverse equipotentialities inherent to the particular meaning constructed by the person regarding the equifinality point – to have a child. Life course trajectories are mobilized and constrained by these personal meanings facing society organization in specific places and times – these are the ADM.

Developmental trajectories of two couples that decided to adopt in contemporary Brazil

In the present study, we followed two couples for approximately two months starting at the moment they are inscribed in the BRA. This means that the couple was not legally allowed to adopt any child, except following the rules established by state; in other words, they should wait to be called according to their place in the waiting list. Three interviews were conducted with each couple at their homes, by the second author. The interviews were followed by informal conversation about their life context and the decision to adopt a child. The first interview was an open interview, and the two others were semi-structured interviews aiming to clarify facts not reported during the first interview but referred to in open conversations, mainly after the second interview.

Couple 1. Luka and Maggie – “God’s will”

Luka and Maggie already had a biological daughter at the moment they discovered that their chance to have another baby was remote due to Luka’s illness. They did a fertility check resulting in the confirmation of their infertility. For this couple, the religious discourse, reinforced by a desire “to do the right thing,” guided them to decide to adopt. It is interesting that the intention to adopt appears in Maggie’s dialogues, facing the doctor – her gynecologist – who represents scientific discourse.

Maggie: [...] although my gynecologist insistently asked us to do it (fertility treatment), every time she (her gynecologist) said, let’s try, let’s try. But then I told her I intend to adopt.

The religious discourse seems to be strongly internalized by the couple. They used to participate at the catholic church’s diverse movements related to couple and family education. The idea of adopting, appears as a divine and missionary task. Luka says:

Luka: Thanks to Him (God), He allowed us the gift of having the first biological daughter. So, since our desire to adopt comes before her (the daughter), when we

realized this little problem (Luka's illness), then, I, I said, "No, that is the thing predestined by God." So, because we had that idea (to adopt) in mind, before she was born, He gave us the grace to have her, and then that little problem. So, between insisting on treatment and deciding to adopt ... the thought of adoption was stronger.

The couple explained that the decision to be adoptive parents emerged before they had the first child and even earlier, before they were married. Adoption as God's mission appears so strongly that it is used to "explain" Luka's illness. This exhibits the regulatory power of the meaning Luka and Maggie assign to adoption. Moreover, the couple exhibits a movement towards "following the rules" by "doing what is correct to do". Thus, they decide to enter the list for adoption, following all the steps required by Brazilian law.

Along the successive first two interviews, the couple persistently claimed that they want to follow the legal rules and the only stressful aspect was the long time spent in the adoption waiting list (BRA). Nevertheless, they expressed their belief that "God will send to them the right child in the right time." It is important to note that the interviewer was known to be engaged in the pro-adoption movement in the small town they lived in. Thus, regulatory power of the meaning they assign to adoption modulates couple's interaction with their social context. The trajectory that emerged from these interviews follows the steps listed below:

Birth of their biological daughter; Luka's illness and the impossibility of biologically producing more children; Fertility investigation and not searching for fertility treatments; Decision to adopt a child and inscription in the BRA – point at which the research with the couple starts; (Presently) Waiting for the legal adoption system (BRA) to offer a child for the couple.

It was in free conversation after the second interview that the couple declared that they also were trying to adopt through alternative (illegal) pathways. During the third interview, these other ways to adopt were then explored. The couple demonstrated some discomfort in talking about them but did so nevertheless. They said that a pregnant woman offered her baby to them and they accepted it. This option was not successful because the mother receded her offer. After that, they also stayed a weekend with a child given to them by the shelter, named Beth. The couple described how painful it was to give the child back to the shelter after the weekend. They requested Beth's custody but it was denied. The couple then met another child in the children's shelter – Mary. Again, they requested custody for Mary. At the time of the last interview, they were waiting on the justice's decision regarding Mary's custody.

Two parallel trajectories can be seen advancing together here: one describes the couple's waiting for the child through the legal way (BRA) and another the couple's actions trying to find a child through other possibilities available to them. In the second trajectory, the parents and other members of the community follow the rules of what is known as "Brazilian style of adoption" described earlier. This way to adopt a child includes actions from the community members in the direction of finding a child for the couple that decide to adopt, including the shelter's

members. This happened when a child was offered to the couple to stay with them over the weekend.

For this couple, adoption has the meaning of a “*God’s will*” *missionary task*. For them two ADM can be identified: one, supported by legal discourse and the other according to the “Brazilian style of adoption”. It is interesting to observe that the couple decided not to continue medical treatment because, as Luka said [...] *He (God) allowed us the gift of having the first biological daughter*”. [...] *He gave us the grace to have her, and then that little problem occurred* (Luka’s illness). *So, between insisting on treatment and deciding to adopt . . . the thought of adoption was stronger*. Thus, Luka’s illness was interpreted in the same direction (“God’s will”), being treated as a “little problem.”

Figure 1 illustrates the two parallel trajectories followed by the couple. Trajectory A seems to satisfy the couple’s public image of “persons that follow the rules and laws established at the public level” – through the inscription in BRA. Trajectory B emerges from an intimate hidden desire to adopt a child through any opportunity available to the couple. This is still accepted in their community although in a more hidden way – accordingly we have called it the “Brazilian style of adoption” (Fonsêca, 2006). The third possible trajectory – to continuing trying to have a biological child – does not emerge. The “divine task attributed to adopting” does not leave room for this third trajectory. The couple does not analyze the two options as contradictory, but instead uses what Josephs and Valsiner

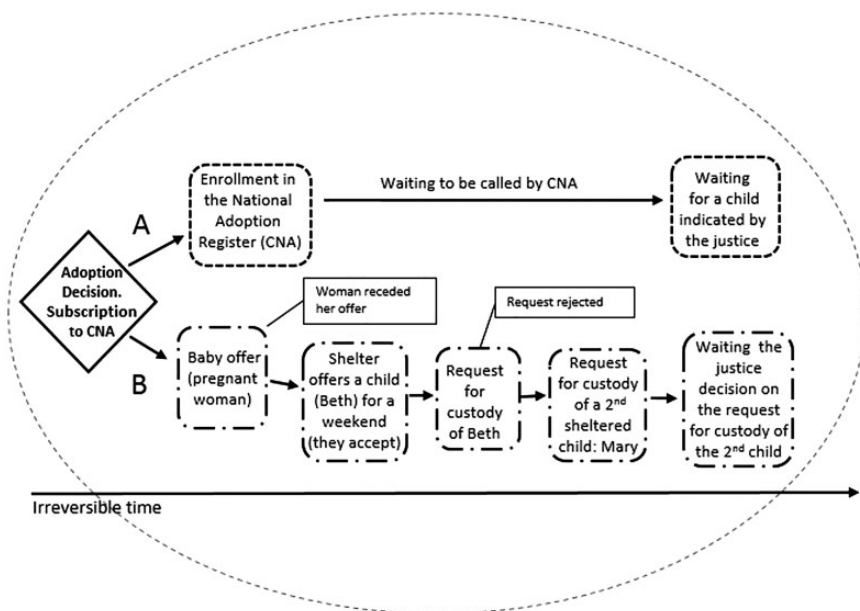


Figure 1. Couple 1’s two adoption trajectories.

(1998) call a circumvention strategy that can be applied here as following: We have done what society requires (inscribed in the BRA) and wait for child from BRA, but because we have done the publically right thing and the child has not arrived we allow ourselves other options as well.

The equipotentiality of this meaning is not a couple's personal characteristic. It emerges in interaction between couple's history and the societal meanings available at a given place and time, as already reinforced earlier. Thus, it is possible for this couple to simultaneously follow legal adoption and "Brazilian style of adoption". The meaning of adoption for each couple carries with it specific equipotentiality for development of their trajectories towards the equifinality point. An interesting point according to the regulatory power of the meaning is that for Luka and Maggie any child available can be their child because it represents "*God's will*". This explains why they accepted a baby from a pregnant woman (who later receded the offer) and after found Beth and asked for her custody (for which they were later turned down). Finally, they found Mary and are presently trying to get her custody. For this couple, the trajectories developed are quite different from the second couple analyzed.

Couple 2. John and Rachel – "To become parents"

John and Rachel have been married for 6 years, during which time Rachel has had multiple miscarriages. After the first miscarriage, 3 years after they married, she started thinking about adoption. In Rachel's family, adoption is treated as natural and with affection: She has an adopted nephew that is at the center of her family's attention. John's family does not feel the same way: When she talked about adoption she had the impression, however, that he seemed to agree but she felt that he did it not exactly "from his heart". Her husband's family does not accept adoption and used to express many constraints and myths that link adoption to potential danger, such as the importance of knowing the genetic background of the child and the idea that adopted children are difficult to raise.

One year after the second pregnancy and following miscarriage, Rachel decided that adopting a child was the right choice and the couple started the procedures required to be enrolled in the BRA. She was again twice pregnant but the pregnancies were followed by a third and a fourth miscarriage. She changed her gynecologist and discovered that she had thrombophilia (a blood illness associated with miscarriages) and she started a medical treatment for preventing future miscarriages.

Some months later, a friend of theirs that works as nurse in a hospital invited the couple to visit a 70 days old baby girl, Jade, who was in the hospital due to physical abuse by her family. They immediately fell in love with the child, despite Jade being in poor physical condition, including scars on her body. Jade left the hospital and went to the children's shelter. The couple started visiting her frequently. These visits evoked new feelings in John regarding adoption. He says:

John: Previously . . . I thought otherwise, right? Because, she was always trying, we were trying to get pregnant, but it never happened, and she talked about the possibility that we

have to adopt. And I start thinking, "let's adopt". But deep inside, I had a fear of Rachel getting pregnant. But then we went to the shelter, and we started visiting children, right? Then, we met a little princess and this has changed everything! It changed everything! They decided to ask for Jade's custody because they felt like her parents. The judge rejected the first application for custody and they asked again. At the moment of the third interview, they were waiting the justice's decision.

Rachel tells the history of fighting for Jade's custody using strong words and feelings as is demonstrated in the three excerpts below:

(1) At the time I had my third pregnancy, we were with the process for adopting that little girl (Jade), and many people asked me the question: "Do you still want this girl?" Sure! If I did not want her, I was not doing it (asking for custody) with my heart, I was just doing it because I did not get pregnant [...] I want to adopt her, to love her, to have her as my daughter. (First interview)

(2) We became attached to a particular child (Jade), developing true love for her and fighting for her. Each "closed door" we find is really depressing for us. (Second interview, one month later)

(3) ...the few moments that we get to be alone with her (Jade) we have secretly filmed and took pictures of her [...]. Thus, when we are kind of sad, before sleeping, we keep looking (at Jade's films and pictures). (Second interview, one month later)

The choice to seek Jade's custody, expressing their strong decision and feelings for becoming Jade's parents and the fear of not getting it, is shown in a dialogue with the researcher.

Rachel: *We already feel her parents (the couple look at each other). We have already had the feeling of being parents three times and also had three miscarriages (in an emotional voice). Now we have a live feeling. I used to say: at any time, at any moment... and I have put her pictures there (pointing to a piece of furniture). She isn't ours, but she was once ours.*

Researcher: *Ah-ham...*

John: *Imagine if we haven't met her? Has she not crossed our lives? We have loved her, like parents. Thus, she will be there forever.*

Researcher: *Yes...*

John says: *In here forever (point to his heart).*

For this couple, we found three parallel trajectories: The legal one, the one guided by the "Brazilian style of adoption", and another that follows the hope of becoming biological parents, continuing medical treatment. Figure 2 illustrates these three parallel trajectories.

In contrast to couple 1, this couple talks about the three trajectories already in the first interview. Trajectory B seems a requirement of the present-day society but does not seem to be based on the idea of "doing the right thing", as it was for couple 1. The most interesting side of this couple's trajectories is that they have chosen one child – Jade. The fight to get Jade's custody composes trajectory C. Trajectory A fulfills the first couple's choice to become biological fathers.

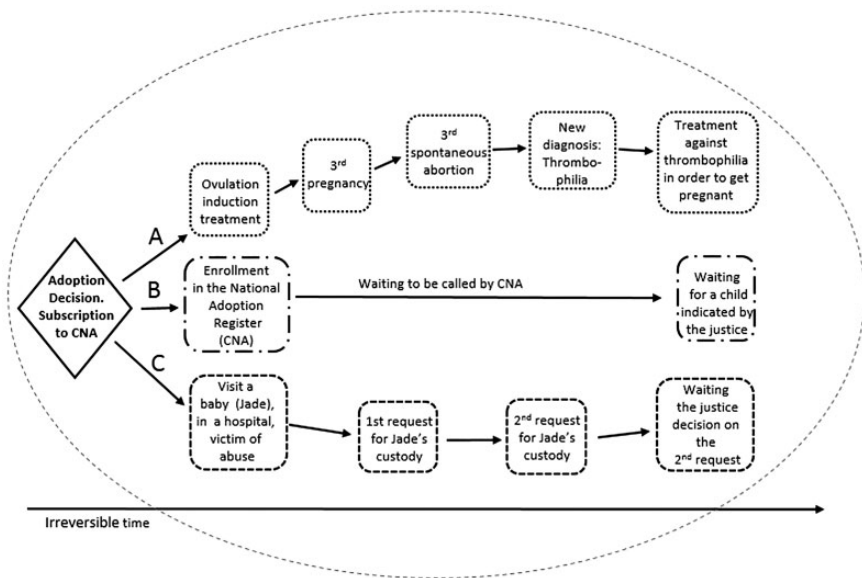


Figure 2. Couple 2's three adoption trajectories.

Comparing these two couples, we can observe how strong is the power of the meaning attributed to adoption. The equipotentiality of the meaning of adopting for the present couple allows them to follow three ADM. Trajectories thus result from the equipotential capacity of the meaning constructed for the task to be accomplished, the equifinality point. These meanings however are not only personal constructions; they emerge in the interaction of personal history and the organization available in society at a particular time and place. The shelters' attendants, like the couple, also share with the parents the ideas and values that support the “Brazilian style of adoption”. Thus, it seems valuable and even an obligation for them to find a child for these parents and vice-versa parents for the children in the shelter. We observed that the members of the children’s shelter endorse John and Rachel visiting Jade. They allow them to stay with Jade frequently and for long periods (first daily visits and then weekly), and carrying and playing with her, opening up opportunities for the couple taking Jade’s pictures and films using their cell phones. These activities foster the growth of affective bonds. The couple has Jade’s pictures decorating their home; they talk often about her developmental achievements and use their free time to visit her. These are parental behaviors commonly directed to one’s own children.

Conclusions

Humans develop throughout life by choosing how to face the unknown future by acting in the present. This process is guided by decisions at the crossroads of a person’s perspective in constant interaction – and many times in tension leading

to possible changes – with the sociocultural environment. Decisions which path is to be taken are enmeshed with other imagined possibilities not taken. Within this complex scenario emerge meanings constructed by human beings towards the task to be accomplished, the equifinality point.

We highlight the power of these meanings as presenting an equipotential directive power. These meanings, in constant interaction with the available meanings disposed at societal level, construct ADM that carry an equipotential power. These meanings are fundamental for grasping the developmental trajectories that emerge – both accomplished and shadowed.

Avenues of Directive Meaning is illustrated through the analysis of two couples that decided to adopt a child in the Brazilian context. In order to do this analysis, we contextualized the Brazilian adoption as retaining two seemingly contradictory practices. The diverse meanings that adoption has for the couples help us to comprehend the parallel trajectories found on the road toward the equifinality point – to have an adopted child.

Therefore, ADM helps to develop the TEA – and, particularly the TEM – by extending and deepening how the person deals with social directions and social guidance as proposed by Sato and collaborators (Sato et al., 2009, 2016). The focus on the equipotentiality of meaning constructed by the person as guiding and regulating the development of life trajectories towards the equifinality point establish a new understanding of the task of comprehending the dynamics of persons interacting with the organization of his/her sociocultural environment. Moreover, ADM concept highlights the need to approach meaning making in irreversibility in the process of reconstructing (R3) the past in the present, while at the same time projecting a particular future. In other words, the equifinality point is constantly resignified during life course development.

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Notes

1. We use person(s) instead of individual or self, precisely because we highlight the role of the organized sociocultural environment as being fundamental for subject's meaning construction. Moreover, it is this relationship – person and sociocultural environment – that we focus on. As Harris (1989) pointed out the distinction between individual, self and persons is important when "... ideas and actions entering into major public controversies show that there are differing, competing conceptualizations of individual, self, and person" (p. 608). Moreover, "To focus on *persons* as agents-in-society brings properties of the social order and its cultural forms to the center of attention, for these are seen as constitutive of human agency as a public fact. Used as theoretical terms in social anthropology, person and social system form a set, eliminating the possibility of dealing with societies as agglomerations of particles or as theaters for the casting, deployment, and review of selves" (pp. 608–609) (R4).
2. According to Zittoun and Valsiner (2016), the focus on equifinality was introduced in developmental science relying on the studies in embryology by Hans Driesch. Equifinality entails the arrival in the same developmental end state through various possible pathways.
3. The fact that memory is a reconstructive process aimed at adaptation to the present indicates that in any act of reproduction the person produces novelty, in the form of adding imaginary details to the remembered core, and forgetting some aspects of the past (Bartlett, 1995/1932; Wagoner, 2009, 2017).
4. It is important to highlight that established analogy with Driesch's embryology needs to consider that the process through which personal meaning is constructed encapsulates much greater and more complex dynamics than the one that is expressed by the equipotentiality and equifinality of embryonic forms. Nevertheless, the equipotentiality of meaning that expresses the purposiveness and directive power of meaning towards a future oriented task can be used as a conceptual source that helps understanding the construction of life trajectory or trajectories.
5. There are diverse possibilities to grasp and analyze the context in which a particular phenomenon is investigated. Besides the literature review, particularly used in the present paper, we can also use the popular histories told in the mass media, like soap operas (*Sangue Bom* (2013) <https://globoplay.globo.com/sangue-bom/p/7441/>) the internet (e.g. blogs and new media sites: <http://www.gravidezinvisible.com/>), literary products (children's book, e.g. *We Belong Together: A Book About Adoption and Families* by Todd Parr, 2007, Little, Brown Books for Young Readers), other artistic products (e.g. animation movies: *Despicable Me 2* (2013)).
6. *Law nº 12.010 de 29.07.2009* (2009). It disposes about adoption. Brasília, DF. Recovered in 11 November 2011. http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_Ato2007-2010/2009/Lei/L12010.htm

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