Yearbook of Idiographic Science

Life Course of Trauma and Resilience

Caroline Skov Vestbjerg



Life Course of Trauma and Resilience

Yearbook of Idiographic Science

Series Editors: Jaan Valsiner and Sergio Salvatore

The *Yearbook of Idiographic Science* book series aims to advance the integration of idiographic and nomothetic methodologies within psychology and the broader social sciences. The books in the series are informative and invaluable for students and researchers interested in theoretical and methodological development in these fields, and those persons engaged with qualitative, dynamic informed models of analysis. The books in the series offer insight into a global network of practices and cultures of research.

OTHER TITLES IN THE SERIES

Ten Years of Idiographic Science
One Dog Is Enough: Ivan P. Pavlov's Contributions to Idiographic Science
Idiographic Approach to Health
Methods of Psychological Intervention
Reflexivity and Psychology
Multicentric Identities in a Globalizing World
Making Sense of Infinite Uniqueness: The Emerging System of Idiographic Science

Life Course of Trauma and Resilience

By

Caroline Skov Vestbjerg



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2026

Copyright © 2026 Emerald Publishing Limited.
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved

Cover photo: Courtesy of Caroline Skov Vestbjerg

Reprints and permissions service
Contact: www.copyright.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80686-428-7 (Print hardback)
ISBN: 978-1-80686-430-0 (Print paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-80686-427-0 (Ebook)
ISBN: 978-1-80686-429-4 (Epub)

Typeset by TNQ Tech
Cover design by TNQ Tech

CONTENTS

About the Author vii

Series Editors' Preface ix

Author's Preface xvii

Introduction 1

1 Lisbeth's Struggles 9

2 The Pathways of Life 13

3 The Construction of Self in Relation to Others 25

4 The Developing Path Through Education 37

5 Education as a Stepping Stone 43

6 The Focus on Life Course Development 51

7 The Connection Between Mind, Body and Trauma 57

8 The Hold in Human Ontogeny 65

9 The Question of Subjectivity and Individuality 69

10 Breaking a Social Heritage 73

11 The Current Path of Lisbeth 79

12 Resilience 83

Conclusion: Uniting the Unfolding of a Trauma with Life Course Development 87

References 89

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline Skov Vestbjerg is a psychologist in clinical practice in Denmark, working in the field of Forensic Psychiatry. She graduated as a Cultural Psychologist at the Niels Bohr Professorship Center of Cultural Psychology at Aalborg University. Her research concentrates on cultural psychological aspects of individual and social phenomena by investigating ways of approaching otherwise clinical questions with a cultural psychological standpoint. Topics like trauma, resilience, diagnostical systems, meanings construction and life course perspectives have been main issues of her research. Besides working on her research and in clinical practice, she also concerns herself with organizational psychology where she among other things is a board member of the Danish Psychological Union, Denmark.

This page intentionally left blank

SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Resilience in Living: Idiographic Science of the Human Life Course

Each human life is unique. Yet in that uniqueness are embedded general principles that can be observed across time within the same individual life course, and the general features of human *being-in-living* emerge across the lives of different people. These general features can be characterized by three themes—resistance, drama, and resilience. All through life a person is relating with one's environment whereby resisting its inputs—rather than accepting these without acting upon them—is the basis for psychological individuality. The meaning-making mind of the person leads to creating and playing out various dramas in one's life, ranging from positive supports for living (life course rituals) to negative challenges of devastations of various kinds. Many—but not all-dramas become traumas in the person's life space, and yet the person lives on. Resilience that is needed for living is the synthesis needed for being human.

The study of the whole life course is a key area for Idiographic Science. It builds on the look on the whole melody of human living (Zittoun et al., 2013) and focuses on the general making of the life course based on local particulars. As known from the very beginning of Idiographic Science the focus in individual case analyses is on the generalizable basic knowledge—idiographic analysis is the basis for nomothetic generalizations, in the spirit of the original approach of Wilhelm Windelband. That approach unified—rather than separated—the general and the particular in human lives. One particular life event is the unique singular emergent phenomenon that becomes important for the rest of the life course to come later. The unique comes first—in the logic of irreversible time of development—and its formal analogues may come later. Nomothetic knowledge—generalized—is built on the idiographic life events (Zittoun et al., 2023).

This book is an important milestone—the coverage of long periods of human development that usually remain beyond the access of traditional

developmental psychology. There have been efforts before, through the use of life course interviews (Zittoun, 2007) and retrospective diary analyses (Nedergaard et al., 2015; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2021). The new tendency in cultural psychology to use autoethnographic methods in understanding human lives (Lehmann & Valsiner, 2017; Tsuchimoto, 2021) are efforts to look at macroscopic processes of life course through microscopic analyses of unique living experiences. Use of publicly available autobiographies become a relevant data source for life course idiographic science.

The analysis of one such life course in the present book is a beginning for a new direction in idiographic science also as it unifies three organizational levels of organization of life courses—microgenesis, mesogenesis, and ontogenesis. These three organizational levels belong together in the unity of human life course. Yet their study as unified structure is limited by natural constraints of accessibility and different time frames for relevant events at each of the three levels.

Microgenesis—the unfolding of personal life event in the here-and-now time frame—is accessible directly only to the person. My anxiety episode emerging when I am trying to fall asleep—"will I wake up in the morning?"—is observable only to me, and not for a research assistant doing research on emerging anxiety attacks. An analysis of unique events within the life course (microgenesis) has been used in developmental psychology mostly in observation of children in experimental task settings, but relating these to similar events that recur in the life course (mesogenesis) and ending up with a general picture of the person's life as it proceeds (ontogenesis) is implied rather than demonstrated. In existing developmental psychological research these three domains are usually separate—analysis of specific immediate events (e.g. concrete dramatic event) is not connected with the next future, creating the meaning of drama into that of trauma. Only some time after the microgenetic event has occurred will it be understood that it was traumatic—and treated as important input for the rest of the life course.

At the mesogenetic level various recurrent dramas of living that are not only stressful but traumatic cannot be reduced to that of microgenetic focus, as the latter is no longer available in the life course narrative where the mesogenetic information is recorded. A person can narrate the dramatic and traumatic recurrent experiences of one's childhood, yet all of these are retrospective reconstructions of the already past real events. Neither is the focus of living on—resilience and specific ways of coping with the trauma would not be available from the narrated sequences of traumatic episodes themselves. It would be a careful investigation into the aftermaths of these episodes that could tell us something about the psychological coping with the adverse nature of these events. A developing child can live under conditions of recurrent affective dramas (Vygotsky, 1994), living in

anticipation of the next similar one (and attempts to cope with it once it happens). The person necessarily apperceives and preadapts to the impending similar dramas, developing coping strategies to change the affective impacts of each of the next episode. These changes can proceed in any direction—blocking or neutralization, maintenance of the affective tension, or escalation. The life course events depicted by Zornig in her autobiography give the reader many examples of such continuity—as well as efforts to break out of it.

Finally, even if we describe the coping mechanisms for all the narrated episodes, the synthesis of all of these into the resilience of the person who keeps living forward—to one's future—is not clear. The mesogenetic continuity (affective recurrence of tensions) together with efforts to break out of the cycle are all parts of the ontogenetic construction of the life course. Zornig's resilience as it is outlined in her autobiography, and Vestbjerg's analysis of the role of that resilience in constructing one's person as *unitas multiplex* (to use William Stern's term—diverse structure of the person (Von Fircks, 2024)), is the ultimate location where idiographic science makes generalization of knowledge about human lives possible.

Thus a developmental perspective that connects all the three levels of phenomena—microgenetic, mesogenetic, and ontogenetic—is needed. This becomes possible in the analysis of ongoing life courses documented by autobiographies. The special case of Zornig—her psychologically deep autobiography—that is used in this book is a good example of the material needed for such integration of levels. In fact, it is the only possible data source for such integrative work. And as such, research of individual life courses is necessarily idiographic. Furthermore, its phenomena are available only to the person whose life we try to understand. The narrative documents of autobiography, autoethnography, and characters of novels that cover life course are appropriate data source for the Idiographic Science of Human Life Course.

Specific Limits on Idiographic Study of Life Course

There are specific conditions for such analysis. It is inevitably based on narratives of the person's past that are retrospective. This reliance on memory, even in its immediate for (reporting a dramatic incident immediately after it happened) is an inevitable limit on the specific details of the event (microgenetic "blind spots").

Secondly, the traumatic events acquire that status *after* a particular dramatic episode happened. In the retrospective narrative it already colors the event reported, as if the traumatic nature was there from the beginning. If in a microgenetic sequence A-B-C experienced with B becoming marked

as traumatic, the later report includes A-B(trauma)-C. The possibility of making direct causal inference ("B causes X after many years") overlooks the actual role of immediate next event (C) as a coping mechanism. Lev Vygotsky's (1994) description of the linked life courses of three traumatized children (see description below) shows how a unique adaptation of the family led by children faces the future.

Thirdly, reliance on retrospective life course narratives is open to on-site dramatic elaborations at the time of narrating. When a person who is being interviewed, or the writer of an autobiography, involves constructive telling or writing one's life story, the author can add different new dramatic moments, projecting these onto the past. The particular parts of self-report are inevitably open to local reconstruction processes. Yet, how can results of such reconstructions give us adequate generalized knowledge about basic human ways of being? How can it be that through reading fiction—classics of World literature like William Shakespeare, Ivan Bunin, Lev Tolstoy, Rabindranath Tagore or James Joyce—the reader can not only understand the depths of the human *psyche* but accept the clear fact that the characters in the novels and theatre performances are from the outset created as fictions? How do we believe in the psychological realities of writers' construction of fiction? Why is the invented (by Tolstoy) suicide of Anna Karenina real to us as readers? The answer to these questions is in the cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics (Eco, 2009; Valsiner, 2009, 2025). Our minds are generalizing meaning makers where the distinction of fiction from reality is constantly made ephemeral.

Psychology is Based on Literature

The analysis of life course in this book is based on an autobiography which is simultaneously a literary genre. Psychology traditionally has attempted to separate its data from fictions, assuming the latter to be the case of psychological phenomena created by fiction writing authors. In recent decades—and closely related to the development of idiographic science—the move to use literature as a phenomenological basis for psychology is to be noted. Fathali Moghaddam has been leading this direction. A large body of great literature has explored long-term processes and change in persons and relationships over time, whereas most psychological research has focused on outcomes (rather than processes), tested in brief laboratory experiments, typically lasting an hour or so. Literary works could help psychologists gain a better "*understanding of long-term psychological processes and change, and in this way fill an important gap"* in psychological knowledge (Moghaddam, 2004, p. 509).

A fiction writer is the translator between the understanding of the human psyche by the readers and their particular desires to read. The reader is given the chance to dialogue with the fictional characters which nonfictional texts would not provide. Compare the reading of an Agatha Christie's crime novel (fictional yet set up for feeling suspense) with a text we use but never read (e.g. a telephone book filled with relevant real information, without a trace of any suspense). The entries into the latter may be true but are of no psychological relevance. As Svend Brinkmann has emphasized, if I utter something that is not true, what I say is not thereby rendered fiction. And, conversely, what we call fiction can be *right,* for example, if it allows us to understand something or lead better lives. On reflection, then, the supposed clarity of the distinction between fiction and fact quickly breaks down. Thus, science and art should not be bifurcated, and when I speak of social science and fiction. I speak mainly of different propositional attitudes (as Eco said) or different forms of rhetoric, and *not* of different forms of knowing. "Knowledge can be conveyed with both forms of rhetoric, and both can result in error." (Brinkmann, 2009, p. 1390).

Historically there was no bifurcation between science and art. The poets, artists, and philosophers of the beginning of the 19th century Europe moved flexibly between scientific and artful creativity (e.g. the work of Valsiner, 2024). It is the 20th century schism in psychology that denigrates the psychological data value of literature.

Writers are psychologists by their vocation—and psychologists have much to learn from the deep psychological skills writers use in creating their characters. The crucial universality in fiction writing is the deep intimate relation between the writer and the characters—the latter "come to life" in the writing process. Fritz Heider (1959) analyzed the psychological work of Marcel Proust, and Lev Vygotsky that of Ivan Bunin (Valsiner, 2014). The depiction of psychological intricacies in these (and other) authors surpasses the reflexivity of even the most sophisticated psychologists—the psychoanalysts.

The Affective Basis for Cognition: Meanings Under Construction

Adequacy of the use of literary depictions of psychological processes is further supported by the very base of all psychological phenomena—the primacy of affect (Cornejo, 2017). Any self-reflection by human being is an act of meaning construction—hence the process of imagination is a necessary part of that construction. When a person claims "I am depressed" it in reality entails a process of search for meaning—*presentification*[1] (DeLuca Picione & Salvatore, 2023, p. 145)—considering various possibilities for naming

the state ("depression" only one of these), ending up with the ontological conclusion "I am X." This process is based on the imagination loop (Zittoun, 2017, pp. 144–146) that links the past memories with future expectations in the act of creating meaning. The immediate experience that flows in one's life becomes segmented by emerging signs that lead the meaning constructor toward a conclusion of ontological kind. The latter is an outcome of a meaning construction process. Naming such outcome ("I am depressed") no longer reflects the process of meaning search for an outcome.

The result of making affect-based meaning construction processes central for the human psyche is the disappearance of the border between imagined and "real" states of affairs. This explains why readers of literature can learn from the results of writers' imagination-based characters—knowing that Anna Karenina is a fictional character does not stop us from feeling with her all the described dramas of her life. Likewise, we as readers feel into the life episodes of Zornig's dramas of growing up, while being ourselves distant from these dramas we can feel into (*Einfühlung*), the affective nature of the event and imaginarily "co-live" the emergence of trauma and the active efforts to cope with it. Literature provides opportunities for such co-living which are wider in scope than psychologists' clinical or research reports. Hence using literature sources as data can be more adequate than those of psychologists' reports, because fiction writers are not limited in their imagination by academic conventions of presentation.[2]

Mutually Linked Lives

Idiographic Science of the human life course is not merely focusing on the given person over lifetime but also considers the life courses of other persons that are intricately linked with that of the person in focus. This a person growing up from childhood into adolescence and further into adulthood and middle age has parents whose life courses take them in parallel from their middle age to the frontiers of ageing.

Lev Vygotsky, the deeply perceptive literary scholar who became a psychologist in Moscow in mid 1920s, has left the World with many ingenious ideas worth further advancement. One of those was his description of the linked life courses of three children all enmeshed within the same complicated family. The problem of the family started with the mother, who was habitually involved in various nervous outbreaks during her drinking sprees. When drunk she had once attempted to throw one of the children out of the window and had been regularly beating them. The children were living in constant fear of such episodes. The three children developed different ways of handling the same situation in the family. The youngest of them

> reacts to the situation by developing a number of neurotic symptoms, i.e., symptoms of a defensive nature. He is simply overwhelmed by the horror of what is happening to him. As a result, he develops attacks of terror, enuresis, and develops a stammer, sometimes being unable to speak at all as he loses his voice. (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 340)

The child's coping is through complete depression and immobilization—helplessness under the circumstances. In contrast to him, his older brother (middle child) provides a deeply ambivalent picture: on the one hand, from the child's point of view, the mother is an object of painful attachment, and on the other, she represents a source of all kinds of terrors and terrible emotional experiences (*perezivania*) for the child. The second child was brought to us with this kind of deeply pronounced conflict and a sharply colliding internal contradiction expressed in a simultaneously positive and negative attitude toward the mother, a terrible attachment to her and an equally terrible hate for her, combined with terribly contradictory behavior. He asked to be sent home immediately but expressed terror when the subject of his going home was brought up (Vygotsky, 1934, p. 340)

Finally, the oldest of the children had to take over the caregiver role in the family.

He understood that their mother was ill and he pitied her. He could see that the younger children found themselves in danger when their mother was in one of her states of frenzy. And he had a special role. He must calm his mother down, make certain she is prevented from harming the little ones and comfort them. Quite simply, he has become the senior member of the family, the only one whose duty it was to look after everyone else. As a result of this, the entire course of his development underwent a striking change. This was not a lively child with a normal, lively level of activity. It was a child whose course of normal development was severely disrupted, a different type of child (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341).

Three brothers—different age levels and their corresponding psychological adaptation means—with the same family trauma. The general pattern of linked life courses is actually wider, including involvement of the whole of the Functional Kinship Network (Valsiner, 1996). Here the life courses that proceed in parallel become interconnected in episodes of providing mutual support.

Living With Diagnoses

Human living is ongoing, while various diagnoses that the medical practices superimpose on it become sign materials for further living. Diagnostic labels are semiotic devices for giving meaning to uncertain states of affairs. A medical practitioner determines "depression" in a client, and the latter,

now thus informed, needs to live on with all ones feeling plus the knowledge "I am depressed." Living with this knowledge can take various forms, ranging from resistance ("this cannot be right!") to neutrality ("I do not care") to succumbing to the powers of the medical science demanding new attention ("as I am depressed you should do X, Y, Z for me"). Or even one step further into the realm of social justice ("as *I am* depressed *the society* should do X, Y, Z for me *as I am entitled to it*"). This diagnostic labeling can easily escalate into a social drama.

Conclusion: Emerging Resilience in Human Lives

The analysis of the single case of a life course in this book leads to generalization about how human beings live through all kinds of dramatic and traumatic events, only to find a way to overcome those and create one's unique life course. In that the expectation for the future is based on the hyper-generalized meaning field of *hope* (Winther-Lindqvist, 2017) which sets up the resilience in the present. Already the act of writing up an autobiography with the goal of others benefitting from the re-presented subjective experiences is an act of personal resilience for the author. Psychological research needs to consider such acts of resilience with utmost care and understanding. This is the reality of living—as presented by the authors writing about life courses.

Jaan Valsiner, Series Editor, Aalborg University, Denmark.

NOTES

1. The term is an English rendering of Husserl's *Vergegenwärtigung*—in direct translation it entails making something *for* the present visible as the flow *of* the present (*Gegenwar*t) is proceeding. It is an act of subjective object-making in the flow of experiencing.
2. They of course depend on the literary conventions of public presentation of their texts, well known over centuries by being censored for political, moral, and other terms.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

As I was finishing my third year at the gymnasium, I started to plan the adventures that lay ahead. I wanted to do everything, try everything, experience everything. I planned different trips and jobs down to the last detail. First, I would start off with a four-month backpacking trip through Latin America. Then I would return to Denmark to enlist myself in the Danish army for the four-month conscription. Lastly, for my planning for my first gap year, I would travel to South Africa to work with animals. The plan was set and I was ready to experience the world and go off on my adventures.

On my first trip, only three weeks in, right before I was about to hike the famous track to Machu Picchu in Peru, I was struck by altitude sickness. It hit at the moment of running off a cliff with a paraglide and I immediately started feeling extremely nauseous and began to struggle to breathe. The rest I only remember in bits. I was hospitalized for weeks in a foreign country, struggling with language barriers and a lower level of oxygen in my blood. Barely able to breathe, I was filled with drugs, and to this day I have no idea what they were. I was placed in several different machines in an attempt to figure out what was happening to me. To this day I struggle with the experience of quick short breaths which can easily happen as soon as I exercise or simply by cycling anywhere. What exactly happens, I do not know, but it is as if my body starts reacting. It does not take more than a steep hill to get my breathing out of its regular pace and. without being able to pinpoint what happens or the process that has been activated. I start to feel a certain kind of discomfort. It's a kind of nervousness and unease within the body. As time has gone by I have learnt to deal with these "body reactions" and to take control over my breathing and the discomfort that may come along.

It took me a while to discover the link between irregular breathing and this specific kind of uncomforting state. After avoiding cardio and other activities that might disrupt my normal breathing for a long time, I began to realize there could be a connection to something. It did not occur to me

that this specific moment on a trip a long time ago had such a hold in me. I slowly started to make connections between this and the issues of breathing and discomfort. A new process had begun. First, I tried to remember for how long the situation in which my breathing became "irregular" was a problem, and for how long breathing itself had been an issue in my life. Some traces go back all the way to my childhood but the severity of avoidance and discomfort started to point towards this specific experience of paragliding. I had to figure out what the actual problem was.

Since then, this specific event of paragliding had been almost erased from my memory, and so the discovery process had been somewhat abrupt. I began to realize that I was struggling to connect my mental analysis of the event with the discomfort I was experiencing in the present. Slowly, small gaps of memory started to appear, like landing on a random field, and not being able to find the car that was supposed to pick us up but while searching, not quite being able to breathe or to walk. To the next moment, I am laying on the ground with my head in the lap of a fellow traveler trying to master my breathing while the paragliding instructor forces me to smell a certain liquid that supposedly should make all trouble and discomfort disappear. To the next moment, when I am in a taxi with even more of my fellow travelers trying to calm me, whilst I constantly ask when we will arrive, not knowing where we are heading. We ended up at a small-town hospital where I was forced to drink a potion of sweet and salty liquid. At this time, I started feeling drunk and high at the same time. Even though I had never experienced a rush of a drug, I am sure that what was going on in my head and my body must be like that. The effect of the potion wore off quickly and soon we were on our way to a bigger hospital. The event itself, the travel time in the car, the process from start to finish from running off the cliff to being admitted at the last hospital, is still covered by black holes in my memory. One of the last things I remember from one of the hospitals is the frightened look in the paragliding instructor's face, and him taking off as soon as I was handed over to the nurses. I remember that I, at this point, was no longer able to speak or walk and I remember that I was barely able to keep my eyes open—yet I remember glimpses in which I must have been able to open them briefly. I do not remember being put in a wheelchair but I remember people dragging me up a staircase while being in the wheelchair, with one person only holding my dangling head, and several other people carrying the weight of me and the chair. I remember a nurse struggling to give me an IV-drip and in that moment realizing that my whole body is cramping. What I remember the most is the pain.

From this point on I am hospitalized in several places, given several kinds of drugs, have brain scans and so forth. I am at this point of the process alone at a hospital in Peru, trying to communicate in Spanish since only a few doctors speak English while trying to figure out why it is so hard for me

to go to the bathroom, realizing I don't have the air in my lungs that they need for being able to walk those few steps to the toilet. I remember looking in the mirror and not recognizing my own body that is now thinner than ever.

A few weeks later, still not aware of what actually happened, I am able to eat and walk. I get discharged with the purpose of getting me further down in altitude and am sent to travel to Lima on my own. After a long and difficult flight to Lima I am out having a salad at a restaurant, my first day in Lima, when the next black hole blocks my memory and once again, I am at a hospital throwing up and feeling extremely sick. Time goes by and I wait impatiently to get away from hospitals and to start the adventure I set off to have. Days later I reconnect with my travel group that is about to leave for Cuba, and only one thing is for sure—I am not missing the rest of my adventure because of this episode.

Looking back, this event became somewhat blocked in my memory and I am to this day not able to pinpoint what really happened and why there are so many blanks. What I do know is that moment of paragliding was the beginning of a certain type of discomfort and years later labeled as a trauma, though I am now only just realizing that it was.

I traveled and I saw the world and then I was ready to start my psychology studies in Aalborg. Long after, I started to find interest in the topics of psychology that for me were hard to understand. I started to research trauma, yet unaware that my own experience could be categorized as such. I started to wonder what criteria were set clinically for an event to be defined as traumatic. I started wondering: what affects a trauma? Is it a question of severity versus repetition? Will the coping be different depending on the event being caused purposely versus accidentally? Will a trauma based on a natural event versus people-induced have a different significance in the following rehabilitation process? Will the trauma based on a single episode which happened by accident like mine be viewed and handled differently than a trauma based on cruelty from another person, that has been going on for a long period of time? What is it about the events that are categorized as traumas that correlate even when the event itself looks nothing alike? Will the same event have two completely different outcomes when happening to two different people? How important are different factors—let's say mental robustness or resilience—for the ways of coping and moving on or is it not as simple as that? What is it with a trauma that affects us and what is traumatic but does not? Can it be suppressed and to what degree? Will you be able to suppress to a level of not remembering but still not remain completely free of it? How much does the body have to say and will the body remember even though the mind doesn't? What does it take to create a trauma and is trauma fully understood from the clinical definitions that are set to categorize such an uncategorical thing?

This page intentionally left blank

INTRODUCTION

Human life is very variable—it can go in all directions, and the exact course of life is impossible to predict. One incident can come to have an impact even years later. A track is part of a trajectory—a pathway by which it gives a continuous flavor to human experience that a person weaves into one's own developing lifeworld. What one has encountered through life may lead to different directions. One has to choose or follow a path, and this choice and action might possibly have been affected. Each of the individual life course paths is unique—while the general principles by which it is built are universal.

There is a growing individuality in Western societies leading the choice of life course decisions to be left to the individual and thereby also the responsibility for mastering one's life and choosing the right path. This sense of responsibility that comes along with the growing idea of self-chosen destinies that will guide, form and affect not only one's own perception of self-responsibility but also others' perception of it. Self-identity is created by the person oneself throughout one's life course as it is reflected upon by others who relate to the person.

There exist a diversity of options and lifestyle choice that constitute self-identity which are impacted by the historical and sociocultural structures we engage in (Giddens, 1991). Some life tracks are expected even before birth and will be influenced by expectations (or lack of them), upbringing, social network, educational choices and even political influences. Others may develop due to circumstances even in early childhood that impact behavior and self-identity. This might be in correspondence with some life-tracks more than others. The position that a person might find oneself in at the present can create different opportunities at particular important moments in life (Hundeide, 2005). This "choice" may come by reflective decision-making, but more often choices become a matter of

Life Course of Trauma and Resilience, pages 1–8
Copyright © 2026 by Emerald Publishing Limited
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.
doi:10.1108/978-1-80686-427-020261013

routine and maybe a passive following of the typical action-pattern expected or done by peers. The way one perceives life-track possibilities might be in relation to habitual lifestyle and self-presentation. The responsibility for life choices and the paths we choose to follow are increasingly determined by personal value and the ability to act accordingly.

How these paths may present themselves to the individual, and what comes to influence the perception of ability and opportunity to choose a path, is a focus I wish to have in this book. I wish to investigate the circumstances that come to influence life choices and how all of this comes to impact. More specifically, I wish to focus on traumatic experiences and reflect upon the potential effect a trauma may have for the individual, and the degree of impact on both personality and life course development. This is approached by the multiplicity of experiences that may fluently integrate throughout development that come to affect life path. I seek to understand the traumatic hold on human ontogeny by exploring cultural psychological perspectives, along with the dynamics of relating to self and environment. This is furthermore investigated by applying a developmental perspective to life course. I will integrate cultural and developmental perspectives to gain comprehensive knowledge that benefit the understanding of impact throughout life.

SCOPE OF THE BOOK

Due to my own experiences and my work within forensic psychiatry I came to wonder about traumas and their effect upon human ontogeny to such an extent that it impacts the course of life. Its a curiosity that made me reflect upon the pathways a human life can develop into a systematic interest, especially in the ontogenetic unfolding of traumas. Some traumas may result in pathology for some, whereas similar traumas for others may be overcome. Questions arise upon the phenomena of a trauma like "what role does the traumatic content have?," "do the greater number of repeated traumas leave a stronger hold in the person than fewer such events"? and "Does it matter whether it is the same traumatic incident that occur, or does it set differently if the type of trauma-induced incidents are different in character and type"? and so forth.

Furthermore, there are more questions. What makes the biggest impact when reaching the point of trauma? Does severity have a bigger impact than repetition of same-like incidents? And further, does it even matter—does there even exist an invisible threshold of traumatization beyond which everything becomes determined? Will one be able to suppress a trauma and if so to what extent? Will the body remember even though the mind doesn't? How do we come to understand a trauma and the effect it has on us and

what is it about a trauma that seem to have the power of determining the continuing stronghold?

These reflections led me to a central question that helped me understand how these ideas were developing: *What are different pathways through which traumatic experiences become maintained in human ontogeny?*

This is the question I wish to use as navigation when seeking explanations in the attempt to understand the effect traumatic experiences may have over a life course. I decided to explore how trauma unfolds in the unity of positive, negative and neutral outcomes. I aim to explore pathways through which a trauma may guide decision, behavior and attitude toward what is encountered. I seek to keep my focus on this multiplicity by approaching different experiences that are displayed by the chosen case of Lisbeth Zornig. Zornig's disclosure of her life course struggles makes her autobiography a valuable source for understanding the complexity of human life course. Through this I want to investigate how the many dramas of her life became woven together in her development over the course of life. The role they came to have in her life course converge to illustrate not only one site associated with traumas, but also opens up the opportunity to grasp the general impact all experiences have, and how these are formed in development throughout life. I am interested in how all or some of them feed into the ongoing life course of an individual. All names mentioned in this book in relation to Lizbeth Zornig's life, and the events associated with them, are taken from Zornig's biography.

IDIOGRAPHIC SCIENCE IN THE STUDY OF LIFE COURSE

The focus on the individual person is the emphasis in this book. This allows for the opportunity to use a longitudinal story in this book—an autobiography. The restrictions given by the time aspect of the book leave the choice of method to be based on the richness of the depth of a single case. Each human being is a single case—of one's own development. At the same time this personal uniqueness follows some general developmental scheme. This unity of diversity and generality is the focus of idiographic science (Molenaar, 2004). With the focus on human development, I am able to investigate experiences throughout life and follow the effects they come to have on a person.

Different methodological perspectives are given importance when gathering data and theorizing concepts and phenomena. Beyond all, idiographic science is the key. Nomothetic approaches can derive from the assumption of "constant principle" and invariance of the functioning way of the phenomena whereas the idiographic approach emphasizes the time-based variability within each unique case. These have resulted in two kinds of variation being IntEr-individual Variation (IEV) and IntrA-individual

Variation (IAV) (Molenaar & Valsiner, 2008). The latter, idiographic and an intraindividual focus, is the one I will be applying for the purpose of the book as the most suited methodological approach. What is decisive for the choice of approach should be the phenomena in hand and, in this book, seek to understand the unfolding processes of traumatic experiences maintained in human ontogeny. My leading choice of focus is systemic analysis of the process of trauma understood from the depth of a single case.

Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915)—a leading German philosopher—over a century ago addressed himself to the task of making sense of the scientific understanding as it grows from single specimens to generalized knowledge. He elaborated that if the goal of the investigation is to gain detailed knowledge of what once was, the idiographic study is to be applied (Lamiell, 1998). Windelband (1998) argued that psychology, personality, development and social contexts are time and culture bound and therefore, their lawfulness is necessarily possible to study through the analysis of individual cases. In addition, I find it suitable to make a brief elaboration for the chosen methodological approach, presenting arguments for the choice of data and for the relevance for this chosen method.

A trauma can be described in many ways which I will elaborate in the following section. A number of factors are listed when approaching the topic of trauma and the ability for recovery: resilience, risk, protective factors, and support networks, to list a few. To grasp the wide extent of the phenomenon of trauma I take the perspective of cultural psychology for elaborations. I seek to apply a cultural angle toward an otherwise clinical question. This, with the intention of approaching the phenomena differently with a person<>world relation that for me seems to be the most explanatory. I wish to integrate clinical and cultural psychology by applying the groundwork of clinical understandings of trauma to further explore the cultural psychological mechanisms that may offer different aspects of the trauma—person—environment dynamic. Additionally, I believe a developmental take on a traumatic experience stronghold in human ontogeny will serve to illustrate angles of a trauma that are essential for understanding life course development. The focus will not be consequences of these specific events, rather it will seek to offer a holistic analysis of the events occurring in human life that come to shape development and herein form the pathways of life through self-understanding and social interaction.

CLARIFICATION OF TRAUMA

It is difficult to give an exact definition of trauma. Diagnostic manuals like International Classification of Diseases (ICD) and Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) can create guidelines for the

understanding of the phenomenon but they mainly offer a framework that results in trauma being used as a part of a diagnostic tool. Trauma is associated with the diagnosis: posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the description for this diagnose in ICD-11 is:

> PTSD may develop following exposure to an extremely threatening or horrific event or series of events. It is characterised by all of the following: 1) re-experiencing the traumatic event or events in the present in the form of vivid intrusive memories, flashbacks, or nightmares… (ICD-11, 6B40)[1]

This description has recently been updated to include more general terms from the previous application that emphasized the importance of the event itself. The definition in ICD-11 has changed to not include specific events but is now based on the assumption that the experience of trauma and the following reactions are subjective (Buhmann & Folke, 2021). This unfolds a variety of trauma experiences which reframes the trauma to be regarding the individual reaction rather than the event itself. Furthermore, there has been added another diagnosis:

> Complex PTSD is a disorder that may develop following exposure to an event or series of events of an extremely threatening or horrific nature, most commonly prolonged or repetitive events from which escape is difficult or impossible (e.g. torture, prolonged domestic violence, repeated childhood sexual or physical abuse…). All diagnostic requirements for PTSD are met. In addition, Complex PTSD is characterised by severe and persistent 1) problems in affect regulation; 2) beliefs about oneself as diminished, defeated or worthless, accompanied by feelings of shame, guilt or failure related to the traumatic event; and 3) difficulties in sustaining relationships and in feeling close to others. (ICD-11, 6B41)

Complex PTSD expands the elements presented in PTSD and adds three further elements that are meant to grasp following side effects from the traumatic experience(es). As the word presents, this diagnosis is supposed to embrace the complexity in responses toward a trauma and also include the exit-possibilities from the trauma while it happens. Especially in cases of trauma happening at home such as domestic violence or abuse, the possibility for escaping or avoiding is almost impossible—this diagnose is created to embrace these conditions.

In addition to the two diagnostical descriptions of trauma, another type of trauma definition in Danish has been discussed—"*udviklingstraumer*" (developmental trauma) or "t*ilknytningstraumer*" (attachment trauma) (Buhmann & Folke, 2021; Heller & LaPierre, 2014). Traumas of development have been described to be a definition including many "types" of trauma, especially concerning early traumas and damaging events that influence the attachment in relation to long-term abuse or neglect of care

(Heller & LaPierre, 2014). Heller & LaPierre present these types of trauma to be broader in the definition, and therefore the understanding and approach toward them. They believe that these types of trauma typically are associated with a reduced ability to contact and relation-connection and are easier seen with psychological struggles later in life leading to mental illness. Although, they believe that these kinds of trauma are more common which often leads the individual to cope by creating adaptive strategies (Heller & LaPierre, 2014). Factors of importance when approaching trauma are resilience, coping strategy, previous experiences, available resources and the specific situation from which the trauma unfolds (Buhmann & Folke, 2021). This creates differences among each individual; therefore, trauma becomes somewhat more difficult to understand and work with. There are different perspectives that contribute to the notion of difficulty when trying to determine a definition that grasp the complexity of a trauma, both regarding the origin of it, the event itself, repetitiveness, the individual reaction and so forth. It illustrates the complexity of the phenomenon. The chosen clinical definitions offer a framework for the understanding of trauma and to add further to it, I wish to implement a developmental focus that takes the lifelong process and life course development into account.

LITERARY CONTRIBUTIONS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

Data can be gathered in different manners both to cover inter and intraindividual perspectives. As mentioned above, an idiographic, thereby qualitative, approach to data gathering will be used in this book. Some qualitative data is gathered through the methods of ethnography, autoethnography and other experimental qualitative methods (Brinkmann, 2009). Fathali Moghaddam is one of the leading voices advocating the widening of the scope of psychological data, considering literature as psychology. I have chosen to use Lisbeth Zornig's autobiography where Lisbeth talks about her life from the age of 3–18, years filled with physical and psychological abuse, no security, constant changes in life and more, which will be elaborated throughout the book. Her biography will give me insights to the deepest thoughts and experiences she has had throughout her childhood and youth in a manner that allows me to follow the development of her personality and behavior embedded in unique personal life contexts.

This type of data material gives me the chance to follow a long-term process and gain insights to her life in changing persons and relationships (Moghaddam, 2004). Moghaddam has advocated using literature as

psychological data that among other reasons allows one to follow a process in regard to experimental outcomes. This will allow me to be a part of the process while reading her timeline and connecting traumatic experiences with a potential effect on Lisbeth's ontogeny. Literature can be an object for a case study approach where unique and special features of a given person or group can be highlighted. Literature reports human experience in societal and historical constellations and the literary work gives support to the understanding of not only the individual personality development over the course of the lifespan, but also institutional and collective processes that come to impact the individual development (Moghaddam, 2004).

Through interpretations, I, as a researcher, am given the opportunity to create stories of the phenomena that can be viewed as data and explanations from a lived life, which is central for a psychologist to concern oneself with in order to broaden the understanding of what a given phenomenon is. This furthermore offers understanding from the inside of a person where, in this case, Lisbeth had the opportunity to express herself—the way she is feeling, behaving and acting, and at times also her reflections upon this. If we wish to look at personality in depth, the idiographic approach is argued to catch intraindividual differences—transitions in time by the in-depth investigation (Lamiell, 1998).

ABSTRACTION FOR GENERALIZED KNOWLEDGE: HOW LIFE COURSE STORIES TELL US ABOUT GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Idiographic science is marked by the focus of the uniqueness. This uniqueness is relevant to encounters given irreversibility of time and the event as socio-culturally bound (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010; Valsiner, 2022b). What is considered unique will also have assimilation to a more general class which is possible given a construction process that encounter similar cases whereas the phenomena in question can unfold (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2008). If certain data are withdrawn from the single case in hand—so long as there is compensation with value and meaning—the produced material will be able to reach a higher level of abstraction and hence be object for generalization (Valsiner, 2022a, 2022b). Obviously, the validity of single cases, and the different interpretations possible while reading a biography, can fluctuate depending on who does the reading. Yet when the readings are based on elaborate theoretical grounds, generalization is not only possible but realistic. The historical and cultural context cannot be neutralized in these cases, but rather included in the analysis (Moghaddam, 2004).

Generalizing is a communicative process, and it happens through abstraction of mechanisms that connect the web of previous events with the

anticipation of future ones. This dynamic operates on the generalized categories that are abstracted from unique one-time contexts to a generalized category functioning as tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1962). One may raise the question of generalizing from a single and unique event and the difficulty of this given the individual human action and personal meaning-making. Additionally, this may further raise the question whether a single case can lead to usable knowledge in the broader psychological field, and furthermore lead to the speculation whether this book may create insights usable for other traumatic experiences and their effect on human ontogeny in general, rather than solely the applied case. These are relevant concerns, but it can be argued that there is a certain lawfulness expressed in uniqueness (Valsiner, 2022b). To discover the inner sense is to discover the workings of the individual mind which might reveal lawful regularities that qualify as general (Lamiell, 1998). Both the nomothetic and the idiographic perspective strive to gain generalized knowledge, and this knowledge is gained through ongoing comparison or by accumulated experiences collected through similar classified objects—both giving a foundation for generalization (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010).

Sense-making is the relevant theme covering not only the methodological considerations but also the smaller mechanisms that will present themselves while diving into the phenomenon of trauma and the way of it becoming maintained in human ontogeny. Idiographic science has as its aim to create sense-making that takes the parts and whole dialectic into account, and additionally the influence of social environments (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2008). The dialectic between internal-external positioning is a part of the idiographic approach and self-presentation from the actor to the observer.

NOTE

1. Link: https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en#/http://id.who.int/icd/entity/2070699808