

# Cultivating Possibilities for Cultural Psychology. Jerome Bruner in His Becoming

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One of the things I have learnt from Jerry is that nobody gets interested and spend months, years, decades, investigating a phenomenon unless it resonates somehow in the personal life. This is even more evident for the social scientists in general and for the psychologists in particular, whose topic of interest (i.e. the psychological functioning) and means of investigation coincide. Jerry is an adamant example of the integration of personal and scientific trajectory. As Jerry himself tells in the interview (Marsico, this volume), his constructivist perspective on human beings might be seen as the result of his early blindness until the age of two and half and of some later events in his life as, for instance, the intellectually very stimulating friendship with Jean-Paul Sartre in Paris during the Second World War. In the same vein, Jerry always encourages the young scholars to find their own path in the psychological investigations (Valsiner, this volume) and even their personal way of writing. Once, in commenting one of my manuscripts he wrote: “...I lose your voice. I think you need to use a less complicated, “personal” mode of writing. More Pina Marsico. More “literary”.... J. Bruner, personal communication, 13th January 2011. How to find our own intellectual co-ordinates, our style and our identity as researchers? After all, the specific portion of reality, the event or the object in which we are interested is part of the same culturally constructed reality where we live, move, act, reflect. But the scientific investigation takes place in the actual world to open up new possibilities, going beyond the given information. For doing that Jerry suggests to follow the intuition (Linaza, this volume) that will be, then, servant of the rigorous research. As Valsiner pointed out: “There are many layers of personal-cultural needs that turn an ordinary person into a

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scientist. Here, the scientist and artist function similarly—the emergence of an idea is hidden somewhere in the internal infinity of our mind” (Valsiner 2014a, p. 13). Yet, intuition is not pure or naïve, but it is educated through the social practices of science. Educated intuition is the starting point of a methodology cycle (Branco and Valsiner 1997) that allows a systemic look to the elements in place (Basic Assumptions, Phenomena, Theory, Method Construction) and their mutual relationship, and drives the investigation of a psychologically relevant phenomenon towards the elaboration of a general theory. This has been the scientific *habitus* of Jerry Bruner all along his career, always interested in grasping the complex relationship of the human *psyche* with the socio cultural context. This holistic approach is the very core of the cultural psychology perspective that, in fact, has nothing to do with the fragmentation of the current research in psychology, mostly focused on “discrete elements of a phenomena” or only “a portion of a behavior” (Marsico 2015b). Cultural psychology, instead, deals with the goal-oriented and meaningful human conduct (Valsiner, this volume; Harré this volume) which is hardly modeled by standardized methods, but that is intelligible through narratives (Daiute, this volume) from which the cultural nature of meanings emerges.

## Cultural Psychology: Back to the Future

Jerome Bruner has had a leading role in the contemporary attempt to reintroduce the notion of culture into the psychological realm. Looking back at the history of psychology this is the third effort in this direction. The first two were the Wundt’s, Steintal’s and Lazarus’ versions of *Völkerpsychologie* at the end of the 19th century, and the *Culture and Personality School* of the 1950s. Both failed to create a new synthetic science: the former because it was “parallel to” instead of “jointed with” the experimental psychology and the latter because it was crushed between the Behaviorism’s fortress and the incoming rampant cognitive bastion (Valsiner 2004; Marsico 2015b).

Jerry has been at the forefront of this current scientific enterprise that runs under the label of cultural psychology, largely contributing to its two main investigative axes: the topic of culture in human development and the dynamic of social discourses of ordinary people in their culturally organized contexts.

Cultural psychology pays attention to the interconnection between mental processes and cultural and contextual dimensions. Its objects of study are the higher psychological functions and the mechanisms through which individuals form their minds and attribute meanings to their lives and to the world surrounding them.

Cultural psychology presents, therefore, the human *psyche* in a constructive-contextualized key, far from any intercultural comparison. Culture is neither a dependent nor an independent variable (Anandalakshmy 1974), but “a label that denotes the systemic organization of the semiotic and historical nature of human psychological processes in their wide-ranging manifestation” (Valsiner 1995, p. 7).

Human beings develop their psychological functions by participating to the culture and, in doing that, they simultaneously create culture: a feed-forward loop that produces both individual and socio-cultural growth. This theoretical orientation finds its finest expression in the later Bruner's works (Bruner 1990, 1996, 2002, 2004), where it is possible to identify the inherent *polygenic* nature of cultural psychology. Bruner dialogues with the phenomenology of Schutz (1962), the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel (1967), the symbolic interactionism of Mead (1934) and Goffman (1969), and the interpretive anthropology of Geertz (1983). The phenomenological approach allows Bruner to emphasize the role of subjectivity in the daily life. The ethnomethodology offers him further epistemological and methodological tools for a deep analysis of the meaning-making process in a specific socio-cultural context. Thanks to the influence of the symbolic interactionism, Bruner further elaborates the mechanisms through which meanings are constructed, shared and negotiated. Finally, the interpretive anthropology allows Bruner to consider the culture and the relation between mind and culture as an ambiguous text to interpret.

Cultural psychology is interdisciplinary in its core. Any attempt to focus on a complex issue like culture in psychology requires an interdisciplinary integration between social sciences and a general historical orientation. But cultural psychology is also intrinsically developmental. It is a developmental science in its nature since it assumes that all the human beings (as well as groups, social institutions, communities) are developing dynamic systems constantly striving for the new. The focus of investigation are thus the circumstances under which novel organizational forms emerge (Marsico 2015b).

The intellectual program initiated by Jerome Bruner needs to be further developed. What is required is to make an effort in understanding the functioning of culture in the psychological processes.

## **Advance in Cultural Psychology: Cultivating Future Possibilities**

The previous pages and the entire Bruner's *cursus honorum* shows the impressive number of different fields he covered along his notable career and to which he always contributed in a original way. But beyond all these various areas of investigations in Jerry's inquisitive mind, since the very beginning there were and still are- three main questions: "*What makes human beings human? How did they get to be that way? How can you be more so?*" (Gardner, this volume). This is the very core of cultural psychology! The fundamental issues of who we are as humans and how we become humans imply a holistic approach to the *psyche* in its complexity (Valsiner 2014b). The legacy of Jerry Bruner is taken over by those scholars that are working in turning psychology into a science of the human ways of being. Being is not a merely ontological state, but refers to the *process*

*of existing* that entails the construction of the human world (Valsiner et al. 2016). Cultural psychology, thus, is the science of the *human* nature and of the specifically human ways of existence that starts from the phenomena of higher psychological functions, and look at how their lower counterparts are re-organized from above. Cultural psychology “cultivates new possibilities” for studying behavior or cognition, by looking at normativity and narrative dialogicality of higher psychological functions in multiple forms and arenas of human activities, including those specific fields suggested by some of the authors of this book (see, for instance, what Ruiz Pérez and Linaza say about skill development and Gómez argues about the importance of play during the childhood).

The human psyche is goals-oriented, operates on the borders between past and future, and unites personal and social sides of its development through various aspects of culture. As Bruner has pointed out in the interview (Marsico, this volume), psychology necessarily deals with conflicting, unpredictable and ambiguous situations. Thus, human dilemmas are, heuristically speaking, the most fitting phenomena to investigate. These dilemmas challenge the culturally established set of meaning, making possible the emergence of the novelty. The borders between *actual and possible worlds* are at stake here and acquire an epistemological and methodological relevance in our globalizing societies, where the social practices of borders construction and re-construction (Marsico 2015a; Marsico and Varzi 2016) and the cultural organization of borders within educational settings (Marsico et al. 2015) have profound implications on how we can *become more human*, cultivating new developing possibilities for the next generations.

Once again Bruner’s ideas are feeding this new frontier of cultural psychology. Jerry, in his becoming old, keeps his inquisitive and benevolent look on the Human Being who is the ultimate and the most beautiful destination of life’s journey.

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