

Beyond Past and Present: Meaning Making, Narrative Self and Future-Orientation

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Abstract

Jerome Bruner's contribution to understanding human psychological functioning is manifold. In this commentary I focus on his suggestion that human action is always purposeful and directed towards imagined goals, and interrogate the contributions made by Salvatore and Fasulo in light of this idea. I develop further the ideas discussed in these papers to propose a conceptualisation of future-orientedness of human meaning-making, and discuss how narrating as a process of creating and enacting possibilities for the future could be understood. In my commentary I emphasize that human meaning making is not only about making sense of things that have already happened, but also about imagining a future where self and self's relation to others could be otherwise. I suggest that conceptual models of meaning making need to move beyond a mere focus on past and present and instead consider the process of becoming in relation to and together with others.

Keywords Meaning-making · Future-orientation · Narrating · Becoming

Introduction

The papers in the current special issue, as well as contributions to a recent volume (Marsico 2015) have comprehensively discussed the importance of Jerome Bruner's work to contemporary psychological science. In this commentary I want to focus on one aspect of his work, namely his suggestion that in order to understand human psychological functioning we need to understand how humans make meanings, and how that process is always guided by our culture and is directed towards future. The cornerstone of this suggestion is the idea that mental processes do not merely extract

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and process information about the world, but instead they actively construct this information and thus shape the way we experience world (Bruner 1990). As Salvatore (2019) in his contribution suggests, mental processes make the environment meaningful for the person by providing means for interpreting the experience in accordance with the person's way of life. That is, mental processes give us the tools to integrate our new experiences with our previous and anticipated future experiences into a dynamic and constantly evolving, yet nevertheless meaningful whole. For Bruner (1990), this shaping occurs mainly through the use of narrative thought that gives a specific form to the experience and makes it part of the dynamic whole that is the person's way of living: "Our capacity to render experience in terms of narrative is not just child's play, but an instrument for making meaning that dominates much of life in culture" (p. 97). In other words, narrative is not simply a schema or structure that we use to make our experiences intelligible to ourselves and to others – rather, by using narrative structure when describing our experiences we shape these experiences and give meaning to our relationship with the world in a manner that reflects and enacts our experiences in the past, present and anticipated future.

In this commentary I am particularly interested in Bruner's (1990) suggestion that human action is always purposeful and directed towards imagined goals. In other words, I focus on the idea that human meaning making is always future-oriented. With that idea in mind, I interrogate the contributions made by Salvatore (2019) and Fasulo, A. *A different conversation: the autistic self and narrative psychology (in this issue)*. First I will summarise the conceptual model proposed by Salvatore and consider how future-orientedness is (or is not) taken into account in his model. I then discuss how future-orientedness could be conceptualised, and then turn to the issue of narrating as a process of creating and enacting possibilities for the future. In the final part of this paper I will look at the contribution by Fasulo and consider it in the light of the ideas discussed in the rest of the paper.

Conceptualising Meaning-Making

Salvatore (2019) argues that if we are to take Bruner's contribution to cognitive developmental psychology seriously, then we should not only concern ourselves with investigations into the kinds of meanings that people create – the content of meanings as given and pre-existing – but we should also develop conceptual models that explain how meanings emerge. He suggests that we should move beyond the view of seeing meanings as a starting point of psychological life, and rather consider them as products of psychological functioning, for meanings are not something that pre-exist their use, rather they are the results of their use. Building on Peirce's (1932) work, Salvatore (2018) suggests that signs do not have an inherent content, but rather their content – meaning – emerges, as the signs are interpreted:

"A sign is something that stands for something else, with such a relation having to be interpreted by a further sign (Peirce 1897/1932). Thus, a sign does not have an inherent content; rather it acquires its value owing to the transition of which it is a part, that is, the capacity to refer to "something else" as *defined by another sign* – and so on, in an infinite chain. [...] *the meaning is the sign that follows.*" (Salvatore 2018, p. 42, original emphasis)

In modelling the emergence of meanings Salvatore thus emphasises the processual ontology of psychological functions, where meanings are not seen as entities that are held or contained in signs, but rather as products of the ongoing process of interpretation of previous signs in an infinite chain. In other words, meanings are not ‘things’ that we need to describe, map or uncover, rather they are created by the process of meaning making as local and temporary states of the whole semiotic dynamic.

Suggestion that meanings should be seen as interpretations of previous signs brings to the fore the issue of ‘choosing’ these interpretations out of all the possible ones. For as Salvatore (2018) writes, signs acquire their meaning by being positioned not in relation to one specific interpretation, but in relation to a interpretation within the field of possible interpretations: “Actions and events are acts of meaning whose value and significance lie in the position they have in the dynamics of sensemaking for which they work” (pp. 42–43). The sign thus creates a temporary relation to or connection in the field of possible meanings, and through that adds strength to the ‘chosen’ relation, while also reproducing the whole field of possible interpretations. In explaining how certain interpretations are ‘chosen’ or ‘preferred’, Salvatore (2018) introduces culture into his conceptual model. Culture, he says, “is the field distribution of probabilities of transition among signs. [...] culture is the matrix of asymmetrical preferences that each sign has of combining with other signs” (p. 44). He uses the metaphor of a passage through the woods that has been created by repeated usage, to explain how culture offers scenarios as somewhat stable dynamic networks of co-occurring signs. Culture therefore guides the process of meaning making – it sets the boundaries for possible meaning creations. The scenarios are continuously activated and through that reproduced over time as the most meaningful ways of unfolding the interpretation of signs amongst the many possible although improbable ways. In this way culture does not determine, but shapes and guides – simultaneously constrains and enables – the emergence of meanings.

In accordance with these considerations, Salvatore (2018) suggests to view meaning as having two forms or components: “On the one hand, the meaning is in the sign that follows and interprets the previous one. On the other hand, the meaning consists of the scenario according to which the transition [from previous sign] is made possible” (p. 45). Meaning, in his view, can thus be understood as a sign in which the interpretation is temporarily and locally specified, and as a field that makes this interpretation possible. Accordingly he also distinguishes between two processes: that of meaning making which is the process of interpretation the previous sign, and that of sense making as the ongoing semiotic dynamics through which the signs are endowed with a specific interpretation (Salvatore 2019). For Salvatore, both of these processes require attention as two levels of investigation.

The conceptual model outlined by Salvatore offers a useful way of moving beyond an essentialist view of meanings and towards a process-oriented view of meaning making. However, focusing on the process of meaning making also requires that we pay attention to the persons who make meanings and the purpose that this process has for them (Bruner 1990). As Valsiner (2015) discussing Bruner’s views, writes: “conduct is constructed by goals-oriented agents (persons) who posit a future state of possible affairs *and then proceed to construct it*” (p. 80, original emphasis). In my view this idea that meanings are made by goal-oriented agents is somewhat overlooked in Salvatore’s model. He suggests that human meaning making is guided by the

scenarios that culture offers and unfolds through creating chains of interpretations in accordance with the person's 'way of life', yet does not offer a more specific conceptualization of this 'way of life'. In my interpretation, conceptualizing human meaning making as purposeful does not entail developing a view of this process as having a teleological end-goal, but instead requires careful consideration of the time-dimension and the role it plays in this process. For meaning making is not merely an attempt to make past experiences meaningful in order to function effectively in the present. It is also a preparatory act – an attempt to prepare oneself for the unknown yet anticipated future, and move towards a future state where things can be potentially different. This requires conceptualising how the possibility of a different interpretation and a possibility to be otherwise, emerges in the process of meaning making as past, present and future become interlaced. It also requires considering the intertwinement of cultural and personal, in particular, how in the process of meaning making the cultural guidance becomes intertwined with the agency of the individual who is acting with a purpose in mind. These are the conceptual issues I will turn to now.

Meaning Making and Future-Orientation

The human conduct takes place in the irreversible flow of time, which makes it impossible to predict the future with certainty based on past experience. Nevertheless, building upon our own experiences in the past and present and upon the wealth of knowledge and experience embedded in our social and cultural world, we can still imagine and anticipate possible future scenarios. In this sense, human meaning making is necessarily future-oriented. As Valsiner (2014) writes: “The function of signs is always future-oriented, both in their immediate impact (turning the next immediate future into a new present) and in their general orientation towards encountering similar situations in some indeterminate future moment” (pp. 117–118). The use of signs and the making of meanings thus gives us the means of managing our movement into the future, for we are able to move beyond the AS-IS world and create AS-IF scenarios that enable us to imagine that what is not yet but could be or that what is not real but could be. In fact, we spend a significant amount of time thinking about the AS-IS world and revisiting our past experiences in order to imagine how they could have been different and how a different interpretation of those experiences could make our movement into the future different and perhaps even better (Märtsin 2018). As Valsiner (2014) writes:

“What looks as if it entails ‘looking back’ at the given moment is actually ‘looking forward’, thanks to the accessibility of different traces of signs from the past. Within irreversible time one cannot reference ‘what was’ without making it to be in the service of ‘what might come’” (p. 118).

As discussed above, Salvatore (2018, 2019) suggests that meanings emerge as temporary local relations with the field of possible interpretations. The figure and ground relationship may describe this temporary relationship in the best possible way. Valsiner (2007), too, argues that meaning making does not canalize a person's actions and interpretations towards one desirable trajectory in the future. That is, the imagination does not allow us to create one AS-IF scenario, but multiple possible scenarios emerge

from our negotiations between the AS-IS and AS-IF worlds, out of which we choose one as useful and meaningful for our current purposes. Imagine a mother trying to interpret the crying of her one-year-old son: is he hungry? Is he tired? Does he need a nappy change? Or a cuddle? Picking up her son and giving him a kiss canalizes mum's interpretation towards the last interpretation, while all the other possible ways of interpreting the child's behavior remain available as possible future interpretations. Importantly though, these other possible and imagined connections that do not eventuate, do not disappear completely, but remain available as shadows of the actualized connections, creating a field of possible or potential connections for the future (Bastos 2017). Although being dormant in the particular act of meaning making, as part of the field of possibilities, these shadows have the power of amplifying, directing and creating continuity, while also potentially undermining the realized trajectories (Bastos 2017).

When writing about the field in relation to which meanings are made, Salvatore argues that these fields are often affective, for the scenarios that guide our meaning making are highly generalized. Valsiner (2007), too views the cultural guidance of our meaning making in terms of the creation of highly generalized and affective fields. While Salvatore discusses these affective fields in generic terms, Valsiner is more specific, suggesting that there is a particular group of signs – promoter signs, which are highly generalized and abstract and function as value-orientations that guide our movement towards future. He writes:

“The promoter role of these signs is a feed-forward function: they set up the range of possible meaning boundaries for the unforeseeable, yet anticipated, future experiences with the world. The person is constantly creating meaning ahead of time when it might be needed: Orienting oneself towards one or another side of the anticipated experience, and thus preparing oneself for it” (Valsiner 2007, p. 58).

In my reading, promoter signs or value-orientations thus capture the idea of future goal-orientedness of human conduct, for they function as pull factors that drag us towards certain ways of thinking, feeling and acting in our world and push us away from some other ways of moving forward towards the future. They are highly abstract and generalized, providing not a rational and articulated reason for our conduct, but rather an affective orientation about how we should or could act, feel or think. In my interpretation they echo Charlotte Bühler's idea of life-goal orientations that are pursued throughout the life-course often in an unconscious way. Bühler (Bühler and Massarik 1968) suggests that in the most general sense every person strives towards a goal to live a meaningful and self-fulfilling life. However, this general goal becomes negotiated and constructed into a personal and idiosyncratic trajectory or image about one's unpredictable yet anticipated future. For Bühler, life-goal orientations emerge from our dynamic interactions with the socio-cultural environment in which our development unfolds and are thus based on the environmental affordances that are available to us. In Salvatore's terminology, they emerge within the range of possibilities offered by the cultural scenarios. But they combine environmental affordances with individuals' personal history in an idiosyncratic manner, interlacing experiences from the past, present and anticipated future. At the same time, as highly generalized meta-signs they do not provide a concrete direction towards one particular goal, but rather function as semiotic

regulators that enable one to organise and coordinate the construction, maintenance and abandoning of other signs on lower levels of generalisation (Valsiner 2014).

I have introduced the notion of life-goal orientation in this paper in order to suggest that developing an explicit conceptualisation of such semiotic regulators that posit a possible future state of affairs and allow human agents to move towards a personally relevant and meaningful signpost in the future, would effectively complement the model of meaning making that Salvatore proposes. In the remainder of this paper I will concentrate on the topic of narrative. In particular, I will seek to discuss how the interlacing of past, present and future that emerges when we create life-goal orientations and that is so central to human meaning making, occurs in the act of narrating. I will also seek to develop this idea further by discussing the role that others play in this process.

Meaning Making and Narrative Self

The idea that meaning has two forms – a sign that interprets the previous sign and a field in relation to which this interpretation emerges – is well aligned with Bruner’s conceptual framework, especially his ideas about narrative thought (see also Fioretti and Smorti 2019). While writing about the way humans create and use narratives Bruner (1990) proposes:

“Human being, interacting with one other, form a sense of the canonical and ordinary as a background against which to interpret and give narrative meaning to breaches in and deviations from “normal” states of the human condition. Such narrative explications have the effect of framing the idiosyncratic in a “lifelike” fashion that can promote negotiation and avoid confrontational disruptive strife. [...] cultural meaning making [is] a system concerned not solely with sense and reference but with “felicity conditions” – the conditions by which differences in meaning can be resolved by invoking mitigating circumstances that account for divergent interpretations of “reality” (p. 67).

For Bruner too, then, the culture provides the background against which to interpret the new events and actions and one’s role in them. It is the canonical background – the highly generalised and abstract affective field – that provides means for interpreting and making sense of the personal and unique experiences. And for Bruner, it is the narrative that offers the form and means for making that interpretation and negotiation intelligible for self and others.

Daiute (2015) defines narrative as “a mode of discourse reporting events in oral, written, and visual language” (p. 158). However, like Bruner, she suggests that narrative as a discursive activity does not only report and express symbolic thinking, but also shapes and develops it. While much research has focused on the major elements of narrative, such as plot, time, landscape, and consciousness, Daiute argues that we need to also pay attention to the purpose and function of narrative. For her, the function of narrative is always relational:

“Narrating is an activity people use to mediate – to manage – interactions that matter to them. Narrators recount experiences and tell stories to solve problems,

to make friends, to pursue opportunities, to live good lives. This sense-making function involves using narrative as a tool to figure out what is going on in the environment, how one fits, and how situations might be better. For these reasons, narrating is a process that occurs within a complex network of social structural, interpersonal, and environmental relations” (Daiute 2015, p. 162-163).

Narrative, then, is not simply about telling a personal story about past events – placing it in relation to the culturally accepted, the canonical. Rather it is a mediational means that aims to negotiate and renegotiate a certain kind of relationship between the self and others – real and imagined – and with that enable the movement of the self forward into the future. According to Daiute, this future-orientation is central for narrative, for it is not simply about remembering past events, but it is also about imagining a future where things could potentially be otherwise. She writes:

“Narrative is a genre for enacting possibilities, as narrating is not only about memories of the past but also a means of enacting the present and most interestingly, imagined, hypothetical events and understandings. People sometimes narrate possibilities they achieved in the past, but narrating is also a means for imagining what has never occurred and what will never occur. As an expressive medium rooted in the world and in activity but also employing symbolic devices, narrative is hypothetical thinking. Truth and fiction are entangled in the narratives that construct our daily lives, requiring not only factual reporting but interpreting and imagining” (Daiute 2015, p. 160).

Daiute thus highlights the purpose and future-orientation of meaning making carried out through narrative form by human agents. But instead of viewing narrative as a linear progress from past to the present and into the future, where past events that disrupt the ordinary are placed in a meaningful relationship with the canonical and therefore a status quo gets negotiated and reestablished, Daiute (2015) suggests to move beyond investigating how the renegotiation of the order is achieved in the narrative, and rather pay attention to the challenges, disruptions and conflicts that are discussed as openings for possibility for things to be otherwise. She writes: “It is also worth asking whether narrative imaginings might be escapes from challenging life circumstances, playful engagements of experience, or effortful figuring out of alternative interpretations of experience and intentions” (Daiute 2015, p. 162). Narrative thus is not merely a negotiation that results in the reestablishment of the order and making the extraordinary ordinary, but it reveals the tensions, the disruptions, and the ambivalences that matter to the narrators and are important for understanding how movement into the future can and could unfold. Narrative thus becomes the means for imagining how things could be otherwise and narrating becomes the means of enacting that possibility.

It is this idea of narrating as a relational act where possibilities for things to be different and otherwise are negotiated for the self and others that I want to use in the last part of this paper to look at the case study discussed in *Fasulo, A. A different conversation: the autistic self and narrative psychology (in this issue)* contribution. In particular I want to focus on her idea that meaning making is not a individual process carried out in isolation from others, but rather meanings are co-constructed as interlocutors engage with each other in a purposeful manner.

Narrating the Becoming of Self

In her article, Fasulo, A. *A different conversation: the autistic self and narrative psychology (in this issue)* offers an interesting analysis of interactions between an adult man with autism and his counselor. She uses Bruner's conceptual framework and particularly his ideas about the development of narrative thought, to interrogate two suggestions about autism – first, the paradox of the autistic self whereby autistic people appear to be egocentric, yet also have difficulties accessing and expressing their internal states, and second, low narrative abilities of people with autism. Drawing upon Bruner's theorizing she concludes that the awkwardness of narratives told by autistic people, as the ones included in her paper, may not stem from their lack of self-referentiality or poor narrative structure of their stories. Rather, she argues, people with autism may have relatively limited practice with narrative co-construction and this results in their tendency to narrate stories that are monologic and make it hard for their interlocutors to participate in the meaning making or joint narrative problem-solving. In terms of self-narratives, she thus suggests that in this kind of monologic narrating, the other has very limited opportunities to 'help' negotiate the circumstances that make one's diversions from the canonical meaningful and create a version of the self that has good reasons for acting in contradiction to the cultural canon.

Fasulo's argument thus echoes Daiute's suggestion above that narrating is first and foremost a relational act that aims to place the self in relation to others. In fact, Fasulo goes further to point out that others – real or imagined, present or absent – are co-constructors in the process of meaning-making, whose ability to 'assist' us in negotiating the unusual events and acts of the self in relation to the ordinary and culturally accepted, depends on our ability to engage with them and let them into our meaning making. Her analysis suggests that the reason why narratives of autistic people seem so different is precisely because they do not seem to be relational. That is, they do not seem to be about figuring out – together with the real or imagined interlocutor – “what is going on in the environment, how one fits, and how situations might be better” (Daiute 2015, p. 163). For me, this last part – how things might be better – is crucial in conceptualizing self-narratives, for self is not constructed only based on the interpretations of past and present events and actions, but importantly it is constructed through interlacing the past experiences with the imagined and anticipated plans and projects for the future in the present. In other words, self is not only about AS-IS world of what is and has been, but it is also about the AS-IF world of becoming. In fact, Fasulo also suggests that: “Far from being a backward-looking retrieval of experiential content, an autobiographical narrative is a forward-looking interpersonal project” (Fasulo, A. *A different conversation: the autistic self and narrative psychology (in this issue)*).

It seems to me that part of the reason why the narratives analysed by Fasulo seem monologic and not inviting the other into the process of meaning making, is because they do not seem to be linked to this process of becoming. To be more precise, these narratives leave the interlocutor wondering what exactly is at stake for the self in telling these stories, and what kind of 'interpersonal project that looks forward into the future' is being built through these stories. Elsewhere I have suggested that self and identity could also be conceptualized as hyper-generalized personal sense – a highly abstract and generalized affective meaning field about who one is, was and is becoming (Märtsin 2010a, b). These ideas about self are closely connected to one's life-goal orientations – both are hard to articulate, but nevertheless function as a semiotic regulators that guide the construction of other meanings. As such they are

powerful semiotic organizers of our movement into the future, guiding the process of our becoming and imagining possibilities for being otherwise. They also function as a platform for engaging with others and letting them into one's process of becoming as co-constructors of meanings that support and guide this process. It is this lack of purpose for telling these stories from the point of view of the future-looking personal project that is fascinating for me in the narratives that Fasulo analyses, and that seems to get in the way of narrative co-construction. Surely, counseling is a very particular kind of interaction context and some of the purposes of telling stories in that context are pre-given by that social situation. Yet it seems to me that it is the more personal purpose – what is being created for the self here in terms of a future-looking interpersonal project – that remains hidden in this interaction. And it is this distance and lack of connection with the future that, in my view, makes it hard to enter into a narrative co-construction.

Fasulo suggests that it might be the developmental context together with the unique ways of initiating (or not) interactions of autistic children that impacts the way they see or don't see themselves and others as intentional beings and use those self- and other-images in interaction. Understanding how and why these processes emerge and how they impact the meaning making of autistic children and adults is therefore a worthwhile strand of future research indeed as Fasulo suggests.

Concluding Remarks

In this commentary I have touched upon the key ideas developed in two fascinating papers included in this special issue. Together Salvatore and Fasulo have reminded us that in order to understand human functioning in the socio-cultural world, we need to model the process, and not only the outcomes, of meaning making and also understand the role that others play in the co-construction of meanings. Both of these ideas have been central to Bruner's conceptual framework and by emphasizing these core ideas and offering ways to build such conceptualizations, both authors have highlighted the valuable contribution that Bruner has made to contemporary psychological thought. In my commentary I have referred to Bruner's ideas about future-orientation of human meaning making in order to point towards ways how the suggestions discussed in these articles can be further developed. I have suggested that human meaning making is not only about making sense of things that have already happened, but also about imagining a future where self and self's relation to others could be otherwise. In building a model of meaning making we thus need to move beyond conceptualizations that focus on past, present or future, and instead consider how these temporal dimensions are laced together in our meaning making as we engage in the process of becoming in relation to and together with others.

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