



Contemporary Dialogues between Rorty's Pragmatism and Cultural Psychology: a Reading of *Jerome S. Bruner beyond 100*

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Abstract

The book *Jerome S. Bruner beyond 100: Cultivating Possibilities* immerses the reader in an epistemic, historical, and affective portrait delivered by authors from various fields and distinct perspectives on Bruner's work, in celebration of his hundredth birthday. If, on the one hand, it is possible to say that Bruner's life story intertwines with the history of Psychology itself, on the other hand, it is possible to recognise the author as a great ironist, according to Rorty's perspective, in his way of approaching the transformation process in psychological science. The present paper constructs a pragmatics dialogue with Bruner's Cultural Psychology discussing contemporary Western society in its way of understanding cultural diversity and communality citizenship. In times of media customisation and the fluid and agile environment of virtual communities, bubbles have become arenas for the reification of beliefs and meanings based on validation by peers and not by the dialectical, transformative tension towards their possible opposites. The present discussion builds up a reflection concerning possible affective-semiotics process in contemporary culture, highlighting Bruner's grammar on intersubjectivity and narrative interpretation of reality on the basis of Rorty's pragmatics-ethical philosophy.

Keywords *Bruner beyond 100* · Richard Rorty · Contemporary Western culture · Affective meaning

Jerome S. Bruner beyond 100: Cultivating Possibilities (Marsico 2015) immerses the reader in an epistemic, historical, and affective portrait delivered by authors from various fields and distinct perspectives on Bruner's work, in celebration of his

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hundredth birthday. The book delves into issues such as: i) the relationship between the author-person and the author-creator in Bruner's history; ii) the innovation of his Cultural Psychology scientific project, and, above all; iii) the contemporaneity of his considerations, so necessary to the understanding of the current Western lifeforms and their ethical horizons.

The present essay stems mainly from this third axis to connect to the two aforementioned aspects. Looking to shed light on the strength of the Brunerian propositions towards understanding the relationship between the individual and culture, the authors of *J.S. Bruner Beyond 100* - in a markedly interdisciplinary arena - allow us to build a surplus of vision (Bakhtin 1999) with respect to Bruner's centrality in our everyday psychology and to his role as a great strong poet of the human condition. If science is a set of small paradigms and not a discursive totality, in *Beyond 100* we find how Bruner presented not only the incommensurability of each epistemological-paradigmatic island but above all pointed out the centrality of Psychology in telling its own story, and thus came up with relevant questions.

"I've never felt like a revolutionary person." (Marsico 2015, p.5), says Bruner, in an interview with Marsico, in the opening chapter of the book which propels the present reflection. This statement may sound disturbing to the reader once we acknowledge that it was uttered by one of the main voices of the Cognitive Revolution (Marsico 2017). Intuitively, we know that every self-proclamation of revolutionary identity is always questionable, threatened by its continued authenticity over time. After all, a revolution can only be recognised by its effects on a constantly changing future, one with many possible versions; by its power of deconstruction and impact on the emergence of possible new horizons. Perhaps Bruner, as a strong poet (Rorty 1991a, p.24), was not satisfied with just coming up with elegant variations of theoretical constructions written in the past, but wished to broaden the acknowledgement, in the psychological science, of that which was most inherent to the human condition and its lifeforms, always having us question what is most important: what actually happened or what might be.

If, on the one hand, it is possible to say that Bruner's life story intertwines with the history of Psychology itself, on the other hand, it is possible to recognise the author as a great ironist (Rorty 1991a, p.24) in his way of approaching the transformation process in science. In this sense, an ironist is someone able to question their own final vocabulary since they understand it was produced by other vocabularies before their own. The ironist also does not believe that their own vocabulary is the key to all the answers to their doubts. In this sense, ironism recognises every construction as a result of contingencies, but also as a starting point for new and more interesting issues and potential versions of our ethos and its becoming. Through Bruner's work (1990, 1983, 1996), old philosophical issues about the epistemic subject were reconstructed through a responsible Cultural Psychology involved with the various human lifeforms.

As *Bruner Beyond 100* lays out, dilemmatic notions to behavioural, experimental, and naturalistic Psychologies were not refuted as inaccessible to the construction of scientific knowledge. Quite to the contrary, they were expanded, invested with an investigative passion in seeking to genuinely find out how we become human. Thus intentionality, intersubjectivity, ambivalence and the emergence of the novelty, the narratives, became the central universe of his reflection, eliciting the construction of a new powerful and unfinished vocabulary; scientifically and ethically engaged in generating possible horizons for understanding the relationship between the psyche,

science and life. Thus, this reading delivers a kaleidoscope of Cultural Psychology grammars, highlighting the diversity and relevance of Bruner’s thinking among great authors who were around him at different times, as well as the impact of his thinking on areas beyond the universe of Psychology.

Cultural Revolutions

Nowadays, Human Sciences face a very challenging time, given the problems and outcomes of the precedence of truths operated by dramatic needs, on a popularity basis, versus the truths regulated by principles of rationality and verification in the modes of production of meaning about the common good. More than that, we are going through a hard historical process marked by a cultural war centred on the radical imperviousness of the symbolic borders between us-them. The very meaning of communality and who accesses it in Western capitalist societies is in dispute, an inglorious battle.

Through a profound change in the forms of circulation and access to information through digital social media, fake news and post-truth have become emblematic expressions in contemporary Western culture. With the first, as Lakoff and Guill (2018)¹ interpreted very well, “the use of the term ‘fake’ is designed to delegitimize the press itself” as well as the given information; in the case of the latter, post-truth, it alludes to circumstances in which “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionary²). According to Tateo:

If connectivistic and post-truth societies produce meanings that are based on popularity check, rather than on epistemic appreciation, we risk to have a situation in which any belief is the contingent result of a collective epistemic agent which replicates its patterns into bubbles. One will just listen to messages that confirm her own preferences and belief and reject the different ones as unreliable. Inside the bubble there is no way to check the meaning, because the meaning is not cogenetic, it is consensual. (2018, p.5)

In times of media customisation and the fluid and agile environment of virtual communities, bubbles have become arenas for the reification of beliefs and meanings based on validation by peers and not by the dialectical, transformative tension towards their possible opposites. According to linguistic pragmatism “truth is simply a compliment paid to well justified beliefs” (Rorty 1991a, p.24). However, if we conceive justification as a dialogical exercise of distinct versions of a given reality, in virtual bubbles the argumentative regulation of justification, and consequently that of counter-argumentation, is subverted or even suppressed by the hearty abbreviation of consensus and popularity among the participants of such bubbles.

The emotional factor existent in ways of producing meaning about reality is a dimension that has surprised and disturbed significant sectors of society, exposing the

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/13/how-to-report-trump-media-manipulation-language>. Retrieved: Jan 14, 2019.

² <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>. Retrieved: Jan 14, 2019.

centrality of the affective-subjective matrices' perception at play in meaning-making. The social transformations that have gained momentum in recent years are striking because of the differential repetition of ideals that associate with exclusion rather than with solidarity, revolving around the primacy of homogeneity rather than cultural diversity. Difference is readily objectified as a threat, dehumanised in its existence, confined in the polarity of "them" without any porosities or openness to widen the concept of "us".

The aforementioned issues do not constitute the direct object of the book reviewed here. However, today's humanitarian impasses still interpellate and drive efforts towards the production of meaning, research and reflection in all readers even slightly aware of the crises and vicissitudes involved in becoming human in the cultures of exclusion and triumph of ethical relativism. According to Slovj Zizek (2007)³:

This universality which emerges/explodes out of a violent breakthrough is not the awareness of the universal as the neutral frame which unites us all ("in spite of our differences, we are basically all human..."); it is the universality which becomes for-itself in the violent experience of the subject who becomes aware that he is not fully himself (coinciding with his particular form of existence), that he is marked by a profound split.

Thus, the division referred to by the philosopher, beyond a psychoanalytic sense, can be translated into the effects of alterity in the constitution of the self; into the dialogicity inherent to the confrontations of the I-other relationship; into the unyielding and relentless affectivity of human communicative exchanges. Given that, *Bruner Beyond 100* lays out how the examination of eminently human vectors, inherent to the relationship between the person, affection and language, is a matter central for our current Psychology's understanding of the intriguing lifeforms of our time. Moreover, the Brunerian grammar pioneers this holistic concept of meaning-making processes, investigating the conditions for their existence starting with newborn babies and moving up to the daily life and psychological science universes. It is in this sense that Bruner's legacy in this book becomes a necessary reading in our effort to construct meaning about the relations between individuals and culture today, in order to expand the affective and intersubjective dynamics at play in meaning-making as a beacon of possible realities.

Bruner always used the allegory that just like the fish who will be the last to discover water, humans have their own difficulties when it comes to becoming aware of the historical and narrative seas that make up their own stories (Bruner 1996). The "lack of awareness" (ibid.) about narrative historicity, its historical contingency, would have as possible antidotes contrast, confrontation and metacognition. However, the author already anticipated an affective resistance to the symbolic construct using these three solutions, an affective resistance based on anger and resentment rather than on the decentralisation and repositioning of significant lived perspectives.

Rom Harré (2015) says, in the chapter titled *How Bruner Foresaw a Future That Has Yet To be Achieved*: "For a change in the state of the world to be of psychological consequence it must be meaningful to those who are aware of it" (p.87). Starting with

³ <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-inquiry.html>. Retrieved Jan 14, 2019.

this proposition, which the author characterises as seemingly obvious, Harré extends the anti-essentialist and markedly intersubjective trait of the production of meanings. In his words: “Meanings are not determined by the physical properties of whatever people are aware of but by social convention and custom or by deliberate individual assignment of meaning that catches on or for which the assigner is conceded to be the authority to determine meanings” (ibid). Coming from an interesting pragmatist reflection, the chapter addresses intentionality as one of Bruner’s major contributions to the understanding of the processes of signification, as one of the most neglected notions in Psychology and, simultaneously, as one of the notions most fundamental to human practices’ sign systems.

Jaana Valsiner (2015), in the previous chapter, adds to the discussion an eminently developmental axis based on the axiom that Psychology, as a science about human beings, must consider them agents of conduct (rather than behaviour), driven by purpose. Such proposition of conduct sheds light on the acknowledgement of human agentivity, confronted with the irreversibility of time and the vagueness of the future. Unlike the environment, which has no agency, the human condition, through semiotic mediation and its reflexivity, amplifies the variability of the possible in the open system, multiplying goals and purposes. In the author’s words: “Yet the subjectively constructed notion of such ‘free will’ re-merges in the thinking and actions of human beings all the time – despite being outlawed in psychology courses and textbooks” (p.80).

To illustrate the purpose and vagueness of human actions in Brazil, the 2018 presidential election evidenced the support of young students of a discursive representation of strong conservative appeal, restriction of individual freedoms and public apology to torturers in dictatorial regimes. In interview environments, a very common discursive structure when asked how they felt about such aberrant statements follows below:

“He’s just got a rough, crude way of talking, military-like, really. But he didn’t mean those things. Sometimes he exaggerates, he doesn’t think, because he is impulsive, because he is very honest, very sincere and does not hold back, like other politicians, who are always thinking about whatever is politically correct, what the press is going to talk about. He doesn’t give a damn about political correctness, he says what he thinks, but he’s not homophobic. He likes gays. He’s just like that.” (Brum 2018, El País⁴).

As illustrated, the act of saying more than what was actually said is what the young elector’s speech appropriates. The inference about the other subject’s intentionality, even though it conveys violent and undemocratic assertions, is denied at the same time that it recognises that the subject says what he thinks. This reflexivity, mediated by the honesty / transparency sign and, simultaneously, the paradoxical negation of the enunciated content, can be thought of as a symbolic knot of internalised values, ideals and beliefs, but also as a trait of the intersubjective circuits established in virtual bubbles, in which the grammar is that of factual concealment through the support of beliefs, in this specific case, the concealment of factual authenticity.

⁴ https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/07/16/politica/1531751001_113905.html. Retrieved Jan 14, 2019.

If we think that the linguistic sign is never an intra-individual product, since it is culturally produced, necessarily addressed and simultaneously always referring to something beyond itself (Valsiner 2014), intersubjectivity becomes a fundamental notion to Cultural Psychology. In the chapter devoted to this theme, Silva Filho (2015) addresses Bruner's general concept of intersubjectivity as "the human condition, which *constitutively* enables us to access, interpret and know the minds of others while, at the same time, allowing us to create common signs and to transact 'through the use of language'" (p. 66). Following in the steps of Bruner's propositions, Filho (*ibid.*) emphasizes the intersubjective field as a condition of possibility for the emergence of language, listing three fundamental pillars for its meaning making process, namely: i) the dynamic self; ii) language as practice and usage and, finally, iii) "the minds of others" which act in the construction of assumptions and beliefs about reality and the mind of the other. According to Simão (2010):

In Psychology, constructivism, in its several contemporary aspects, is one of the research fields that has been deeply addressing human phenomena based on intersubjective relations. This does not mean, however, that intersubjectivity as a phenomenon itself has always been sufficiently studied. Human intersubjectivity seems to be one of those cases of phenomena so tacitly taken for granted in being existent and relevant, so fundamental and pervasive in our existence that it ends up situated in a sort of "limbo" halfway between metatheory and theory. (p.88)

Intersubjectivity thus reveals itself as a specific and conceptually unfinished dimension just as much as a broad dimension; demanding a permanent delimitation effort. However, the intersubjective sphere is where we might place human semiotic dynamics as a universe marked by its reflective, embodied and affective aspect, non-reducible to "sharing of meanings" circumstances devoid of tension and conflict. It is important to point out that the intersubjective field's otherness would be one that does not cease to question the subject's meanings, in a complementary and decentralising experience, fine-tuned affectively, pre-reflectively, infra-linguistically and, simultaneously, creative via differentiation.

In this sense, Tateo (2015), in the chapter titled *Let's Frankly Play: Ambivalence, Dilemmas and Imagination*, explores "the ubiquitous ambivalence of meaning-making processes and the dilemmatic nature of experiencing" (p.56). Based on a rich characterisation of impasses and possible meanings about who Hamlet, the Shakespearean hero, might be, Tateo has the reader plunge into a space of intense aesthetic ambiguity and into the role of ambivalence in the perspective of drama. The author thus argues that Psychology that does not invest in an analysis unit that does not dynamically articulate the emotional experience, is Psychology that obtains only trivialities as results (Tateo 2015, p.56). Through the discussion of Hamlet's multiple faces, we can view ambivalence as a dimension stemming from surplus affection and, simultaneously, constitutive of the linguistic sign in the self-other-culture dynamics. Ambiguity, however, can be understood as a characteristic inherent to every linguistic sign, which provides a multiplicity of personal and collective constructions (Valsiner 2014, Wittgenstein 1986, Rorty 1999a). Therefore, to interpret a linguistic sign implies relating to its ambiguity, its inexorable duplicity of meanings inserted in a necessarily

intersubjective field and therefore affective-ambivalent of experience. Treading this path, Tateo posits, starting with Vygotsky, up to Vico and Bruner, that imagination, vivid in the ways we read Hamlet, is not only a way of accessing the intentionality implied in the actions of the other, but also an emotional experience, as well as a leap into abductive generalization. (p.60).

In the previously unpublished “*Clark Lecture in 1968 Process of Cognitive Growth: Infancy*”, now available on *Bruner Beyond 100*, Bruner presents the ontogenetic roots of intersubjectivity and language acquisition through his research on childhood, articulating the development of voluntary control, the internalisation of attention, of the use of instruments and of reciprocity in relationships. Carrying out an extensive review of the research material available at the time on newborn children, the author concludes: “It is astonishing how little we, in an advanced technological society, know about these matters” (p.45) referring to the child’s activity in transforming aspects of the environment to fit their own purposes through the adult’s amplifying mediation.

What seems to get established very quickly between infant and parent is some sort of code of mutual expectancy. It seems to get established when the adult responds to an initiative on the part of the child, thus converting some feature of the child’s spontaneous behaviour into a signal. In turn, the child comes to expect response to follow from behaviour he has initiated. (p.46).

In this paper, Bruner addresses, based on experimental research, the emergence of cognition in the child’s actions in the environment, establishing the process as a broad system, very different from the artificiality of the study of isolated child responses. The author reconstructs in his lecture a permanent process of change, approached from its neurological, reflexive and behavioural bases. As one of our greatest post-vygotskian exponents, Bruner captures the journey experienced by the child-adult dyad in the establishment of intersubjectivity, which necessarily implies the anticipatory activity of the adult in transforming the child’s responsiveness into a linguistic sign.

Bruner Beyond 100 thus bears witness to Bruner’s path, who, like other great cognitive sciences thinkers, focused on the enigma of “how we become epistemic subjects?”, but also, and above all, “what can we do when we come to know?”. That which we *can* do brings up the matter of the construction of knowledge far beyond the elaboration of hypotheses about the causality of events, inherent to thought processes. What “we can do”, in terms of possibilities, speaks to Bruner’s interest in the interpretive subjectivity of reality, a subjectivity that constructs stories that fill in the gaps of the objective world; or, still, to account for the ambiguity of lived experiences and to establish possible horizons. This is accomplished not only in our personal lives, but in the culture and world we participate in.

From an eminently Brunerian perspective, Colette Daiute (2015), addresses narrative as an enacting possibility with the following question: “(...) how young people growing up in the midst of dramatically changing and challenging circumstances narrate their experiences and intentions and how children and youths use narrative to interact with societal narratives, such as reform policies and institutional missions” (p.157).

The author then elaborates on the dialogical, temporal and ecological nature (narrative systems and their systems of rules and values) at play in narrative

construction. Through the discourse of different actors (students, administrators, media) about possible community college social roles throughout the Obama administration - which stimulated the positive participation of young immigrants as a criterion for the eligibility of their stay – Daiute emphasises how the diversity of narrative perspectives and the role of the community need to take into account the relevance of reinforcing the possibilities of the most challenged groups, with weaker interlocutory forces in the arena of social voices. Like Bruner, the author adheres to the educational principle that it is urgent to cultivate a lively sense of the possible in the new generations.

In the most tragic aspect of narrative ecosystems, it is important to remember the conclusion of *The Culture of Education* (Bruner 1996), in the chapter dedicated to the narrative interpretation of reality. As pointed out earlier, Bruner observed that when the interpretive-narrative versions were confronted, they did not lead to a process of negotiation and dialectical change of meanings, but to what he called “indignant rejection” of divergent narratives, thus identified as the root of human illusions. In this sense, the author made a claim on the importance of the creation of metacognitive sensibilities, already in the educational system, which would allow for relations more open to differences, to the focused appreciation of the otherness of competing narrative versions.

Thus, it is interesting to note that narratives are constituted of values, ambiguities, canonicities and surprising details, articulating at their base intense affective qualities. Once the alterity crisis in contemporary Western societies is recognised, it is interesting to think that in the entanglement of possible imaginings and narratives there is a complex dynamic that makes it impossible to position affectivity as a merely qualifying dimension of the meaning making process.

In this context, this kind of affective firstness assumes a regulating role of specific senses in the network of meanings and narratives shared in culture. According to Vygotsky (1974), the theoretical artificiality of the separation between affection and thought transforms the latter into an “unnecessary and impotent” shadow of the action, losing, above all, the transformational dialectic of each polarity towards the other. He points out the place of historical processes in the construction of affections, thus modelling the texture of social relations through the affective circuits at play in the processes of signification. The imaginative dynamics involved in the construction of narratives are, above all, an emotional and dramatic experience, in other words, a *perezhivanie* (Vygotsky 1994). The possibilities produced in this dynamic will have both an intrapsychic and an intersubjective dimension.

Going back to Rorty’s argument (Rorty 1999b) according to *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, solidarity would be most effectively achieved through imagining someone else’s pain rather than through universalist conceptions (i.e. that beyond our differences we are all human after all). Thus, reflections based on arguments about our similarities would be fragile compared to what the arts and especially literature could promote as an affective experience of approaching someone else’s pain and humiliation. Rorty’s fundamental question was whether it would be possible to exist a society in which cruelty was so aversive to its participants that they would make its eradication their greatest collective purpose. For the philosopher, what we share, even with other species, is the capacity to feel pain and therefore imagination is so relevant as a way of expanding the concept of “us”. In his words:

People can be very intelligent, in this sense [rationality], without having wide sympathies. It is neither irrational nor unintelligent to draw limits of one's moral community at a national, or racial, or gender border. But it is undesirable – morally undesirable. So it is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing *sensitivity*, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things. (1999a, p.81).

Maintaining the due distance between Rorty's linguistic pragmatism and moral utopia towards Bruner's Cultural Psychology, we recognize that the human activity of recreating of the world is a semiotic-affective activity, necessarily passionate about the emergence of new forms of attachment to life, to its inherent diversity. In other words, to create is to produce new metaphors and narratives, just as in the unexpected experience of love in which the dreamed possibilities sort of happen in world's alterity.

What *Bruner Beyond 100* shows us is that the challenge of the humanities is not to naively repeat the sterility of a natural sciences' old fashioned know-how, but rather to developmentally delve into the cultural-intersubjective meaning and dynamics of becoming human. Throughout its twenty-two chapters, the book presents an insightful kaleidoscope of the impact and effects of Bruner's work on the contemporaneousness of great interlocutors, as well as shows that studying the individual - culture relationship dissociated from the scrutiny of the emergence of possibilities (no matter how tragic they may be) is a study that places itself outside its main purpose, which is: to dialogue with life!

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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