# Jerome Bruner and the challenges of the narrative turn
## Then and now

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses Bruner's contributions in the field of narrative. I offer a review of the main ideas developed by Bruner in the second half of the 1980, stressing the innovation of narrative approach to reconsider the epistemological and methodological foundations of psychology and other social sciences. Finally, I conclude with some reflections on autobiographical narratives in relation to agency and the role of narratives regarding social and academic spaces.

**The narrative turn and Bruner's contributions.**

I take Jerome Bruner's books, articles, and chapters that relate to narrative as a starting point for my contribution. He published most these texts between 1985 and 1991 (Bruner, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1990, 1991). Later, at 80 years of age, Bruner published a book on culture, education and narrative (Bruner, 1996), and more recently, a monograph on narratives (Bruner, 2002). The texts he wrote in the second half of the 1980s are at the heart of his contribution to the narrative field. The two later books mentioned are reworked texts on the same subject matter, though with a focus on education and law, on which he also co-authored another important book (Amsterdam & Bruner, 2000).

In the mid-1980s, drawing on the discipline of psychology, Bruner sets criticism of cognitive psychology as a basis for his work, stressing that cognitive psychology had betrayed and narrowed down its initial agenda, to which he himself had so resolutely contributed. Its approach progressively had morphed into a simplistic approach to the processing of information; or, in other words, into a computational model of the mind.

Bruner throws into these foundational texts his theoretical and ideological interests, in a search for connections between psychology on the one hand, and literature, humanities and anthropology on the other. This is an innovative, courageous approach that aimed at shaking the foundations of the psychological study of language, cognition, education, personality, self and identity.

Bruner places himself within the framework of a tradition which he upholds and to which he wants to contribute. A classical precedent among the ancestors of this tradition would be Aristotle's *Poetics*, in addition to the much more recent L. S. Vygotsky, A. Schütz, M. Weber, K. Burke and C. Geertz. The interpretive turn, according to Bruner, started in the first quarter of the 20th century, first surfacing in literature, then moving on successively to history, social sciences and epistemology, and eventually reaching the domain of education between the 80s and 90s. Towards the mid-70s meaning became a central element in social sciences. The moment of transition specifically related to the narrative turn (understood as the growing interest in narrative in both research and practice) occurred over the course of the 80s, which, according to Bruner, is when the idea of self as a narrator or a storyteller became more evident. This new momentum was reflected in a short space of time in various influential books from different disciplines: oral history (P. Thompson, F. Ferrarotti), anthropology (C. Geertz), sociology (D. Bertaux, K. Plummer, N. Denzin), philosophy (P. Ricoeur), education (I. Goodson, G. Pineau), and the humanities (D. Polkinghorne). It is interesting to note that all of these books were published within a seven-year period, which shows that the ecology of ideas shapes emerging paradigms based on a set of new, shared assumptions across different fields.

These epistemological transformations form part of a broader intellectual movement – the qualitative approach. This approach has been characterized by its critical stance vis-à-vis positivism, the broader redefinition of the concept of human sciences, a

focus on interpretation and on the construction of meaning, as well as the use of qualitative research methods and techniques, such as the open interview, participative observation, action research, and life stories. Constructivism, postmodernism and literary studies on their part have influenced the development of these tendencies, and the said approaches have had a major impact on psychology and education. It is therefore in this grand panorama of epistemological and methodological renovation where we are to place Jerome Bruner, as the innovator of the narrative paradigm that he is (Spector-Mersel, 2010; Domingo, 2005; Shore, 1997).

Bruner has highlighted the importance of meaning as a central process of the individual mind as well as of social interaction. In psychology there can be no avoiding of the problem of meaning, and when it is tackled, the creation of meaning needs to be placed within a community of practice. Culturalism assumes a shared and symbolic mode of preserving, creating and communicating the human world. Meanings have a situated character and this allows their negotiability and communicability. Bruner frequently mentions C. Geertz when specifying his own conception of culture, and emphasizes Geertz's idea of cultures as texts (Lutkehaus, 2008; Mattingly, Lutkehaus & Throop, 2008). Within this cultural perspective, Bruner's contribution finds itself placed within the vast domain of cultural psychology, in which he connects with researchers such as as M. Cole, B. Rogoff and J. V. Wertsch.

**Characteristics and functions of narratives.**

Bruner returns to earlier studies on narrative, he redefines them and brings them into the sphere of social sciences, and into cultural psychology in particular (for a synthesis on narrative and psychology until 1980, see Polkinghorne, 1987, pp. 101-123). In taking on this task, Bruner is conscious of the difficulties and the risks of his intellectual venture. But

he also considers his initiative a way to invigorate the intellectual and methodological situation of psychology and other social sciences in the mid-80s. Bruner begins this phase with a text of enormous influence (Bruner, 1985), in which he defends the existence of two basic modes of thinking: paradigmatic or logical-scientific thinking and narrative thinking. The two modes operate with different means, ends and legitimacy criteria. The narrative mode is based on common knowledge and stories; it is interested in the vicissitudes of human actions, it develops practical and situated knowledge; it has a temporal structure and it emphasizes the agentivity of social actors (Bruner, 1985, 1987, 1991).

Bruner has shown great interest in literature and has explored the potential contributions of literature to social sciences. He points out that modern science has become less ontological and more epistemological, adding that literature has developed in the same direction. Literature offers a new and open outlook on the world. This is crucial for education, a field that can be characterized by the development of critical conscience and by the search for alternatives and possibilities. This is why Bruner affirms that democratic classrooms are the ideal place for novelists and poets, while dictatorships control literature and hinder creativity.

By concentrating on narrative, Bruner maintains and deepens his interest in language. This does not solely entail language development in babies and children but also the acquisition and evolution of narrative competence, a subject linked to the understanding of the minds of others. It also refers to philosophical and sociocultural dimensions of human language. Language is not neutral and this has profound implications when it is used in scientific, educational, social and political contexts. The visibility that Bruner has given to language and cognition is also important to note. He highlights the significance of speech and orality – which taken in their everyday contexts can be described as processes of expression, negotiation and exchange – out of which the theories

emerge that guide people in their everyday lives to understand themselves as well as to understand others and to interact with them. This is related to studies on folk psychology, which are based on the contents and processes of knowledge of ordinary people. Here we find also, as part of a broader movement, the so-called linguistic turn. Contrary to Saussure's conception of language as an abstract, balanced system, the new tendencies take an interactive and dialogical perspective, and underline the functions of speech in real, natural, everyday communicative contexts. In this field we can also not forget the influence of Bakhtin and his circle.

In addition, narratives are characterized by their complexity. Stories are about problems, dilemmas, contradictions and imbalances. They connect the past, the present and the future, and they link past experiences with what may be yet to come. Bruner calls this process of imagining and creating alternatives subjunctivization. For this reason he insists on the importance of the *possible worlds*, even in sectors such as law, in which the possibility of contemplating or foreseeing alternatives seemingly does not exist (Bruner, 2002). This capacity of narratives for imagining and constructing other worlds, and for trying to make them a reality, is an essential feature of the human capacity to transform our own selves as well as our social contexts. Narrative reality has a high level of complexity, which manifests itself through its specific characteristics: temporality, generic particularity, interpretability, implied canonicity, negotiability, ambiguous reference and historical extension (Bruner, 1996, 133-147).

Bruner has emphasized and criticized our ignorance of the subject of narrative. The knowledge of the ways in which we interpret, construct and use stories has been nonexistent or marginal in the education system as well as in other areas. Bruner also criticizes the lack of interest in narrative and the emphasis on logical-scientific knowledge modes (we know more about the right-angled triangle than about Aristotle's *Poetics*). In an

attempt to change the situation, Bruner has invested much effort into introducing narrative to research, teaching, law and social debates. Teaching the art of narrative and storytelling represents a necessity but, at the same time, a challenge given the difficulty of the task.

**Narrative autobiographies, self and agentivity.**

The problematic and unstable character of stories becomes expressly evident in narrative autobiographies, or to put it another way, in the narratives where the author, the narrator and the main character coincide. Bruner goes as far as to claim that the development of autobiography may be the most important research project in the field of psychology. At this point he cites Ricoeur, who argued that past experiences can only be described by way of a narrative (Bruner, 1987). Autobiography assumes a set of procedures in order to relate past experiences and, in this way, to create life itself. Autobiography is simultaneously a cognitive and an emotional achievement. Bruner links autobiographical narrative modalities to culture, given that culture provides cognitive and linguistic models to guide narratives. In the end, "we become the autobiographical narrative by which we ´tell about` of a life" (Bruner, 1987; Bruner, 2006, 131). Culture then provides the tools, resources and sets of regular processes within a collective setting of possibilities and limitations. To address autobiography means to deal with the conceptions of self. Bruner criticizes the essentialism, realism and objectivism of classical conceptions of self, and praises – following contributions from cognitive psychology and constructivism – a self that is transactional, distributed, dialogical, narrative and agentive (Bruner, 1990, 99-116). "There is no such thing as an intuitively obvious and essential self to know, one that just sits there ready to be portrayed in words. Rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter…" (Bruner, 2002, 64). On one hand, self is a product of the conditions and contexts in which it operates. On the other hand, self is

constructed and transformed through the stories it receives, creates and shares. Such dialectics between structure and agentivity make it possible to carry out the kind of studies on self and identity that overcome the limitations of traditional – individualist and essentialist – approaches to psychology.

**Current debates on narrative, culture and education.**

Bruner's writings are characterized by the search for integration between different approaches. He likes to explore the potential convergences between contrasting theories and models, be it within the sphere of culture, cognition, psychological models on children, or narratives. It is not always possible to establish such complementarity but even when not, we can learn from the comparisons and contrasts. This emphasis on dialogue between different theories enriches the critical perspective which Bruner assumes in order to present his arguments on the framework of society and culture as the necessary contexts for understanding stories and social interaction as well as the concept of self. Bruner echoes the critical perspective of P. Freire in Brazil, P. Bourdieu in France, and N. Postman in America, and feels worried about the impacts of poverty and social class inequalities on the education system. Hence he recognizes the political dimension of education. I think we need to revive and, what is more, explore such concerns in greater depth in Europe and America – contexts which are increasingly focused on results and outcomes. The support for a progressive pedagogical model, to which Bruner has so greatly contributed, needs to urgently find new paths and alternatives. Raising a critical consciousness and enriching the powers of the mind to enable it to manage individual life experiences as well as social situations continue to top the list of important educational objectives in all stages of human life.

The pedagogies that can already be labeled biographical and narrative can help us in this task (González Monteagudo, 2008, 2011). Biographical research and narrative approaches, in their two-fold dimension of ˹*big stories*˼ and ˹*small stories*˼ (Bamberg, 2007), are providing interesting contributions to the construction of a renewed educational and cultural theory, which is shaping up to be more culturalist, contextual and dialogical than traditional education theory has been.

This new intellectual, investigative, academic scene, in which the narrative paradigm is deservedly gaining ground (Spector-Mersel, 2010), presents us with a number of challenges. To conclude, stemming from Bruner's legacy, I will point out some of those that I consider most relevant and on which we need to work over the coming years:

- The criteria for interpreting and analyzing narratives, particularly problematic in the case of autobiographical stories.

- The role of social actors and participants who function as collaborators in forming interpretations and analyses. This topic is highly relevant in the educational domain. The way in which this challenge is taken on denotes a dividing line between research and practice in education undertaken from narrative approaches. The francophone approach in *Histoires de vie en formation*, for example, defends a co-interpretation model, or in other words, an active collaboration between professionals and social actors, both in research and education (González Monteagudo, 2008).

- The danger of reifying and essentializing narratives, considering them as objective data, and upholding traditional conceptions of self. In this regard, Bamberg (2011) casts doubt on the term ´narrative`, suggesting instead the term *narrating*.

-  The need to work across different disciplines using different approaches should not cause us to lose sight of the relationships that exist between the micro and the

macro level, agentivity and structure, and the individual and the group. To me the search for relationships between levels and perspectives or different outlooks seems urgent.

- In this context, the approaches of narrative psychology can benefit from sociological contributions. To give an example of what I want to say here, I am thinking of M. Weber and his reflections on power, legitimacy and coercion. This can help us limit the voluntarism and the idealism of some viewpoints on social actors as the exclusive constructors of their own worlds.

- This in turn takes us to the issue of axiological and ideological neutrality of research in social sciences. I think there is a need to develop a more socially and politically situated outlook with regards to our narrative and biographical projects. The critical discussion on the political and economic uses of storytelling in which Salmon (2010) engaged in represents a good starting point for future reflection.

- The diversity of our linguistic, national and disciplinary contexts creates an objective difficulty for collaboration. We should be more sensitive to and conscious of these issues to find the best way to handle them in this increasingly interrelated and globalized world.

- Finally, we come across a dilemma between description and theorization (for theorization, in particular on self and identity, see Bamberg, 2010), and another between what we can call basic research and intervention or practice in domains such as education, communication, conflict, social work, health and others. We will need to reflect more on the collaboration between the different approaches and subfields related to narratives and biographical studies.

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