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“Life as Narrative” Revisited

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Jerome Bruner is undoubtedly one of the most influential and debated narrative theorists in cultural studies and an important figure in transmitting ideas between literature, cultural studies and psychology. Recently, his work on narrative cognition and “folk psychology” has received new vitality in David Herman’s (2002, 2008) work; whereas Galen Strawson (2004) has foregrounded Bruner’s thought by targeting him, among others, in his own criticism of narrativity. The purpose of this article is not to evaluate the whole debate, nor Bruner’s whole contribution to cultural psychology or narrative theory. Instead, my modest intention is to study one single article, “Life as Narrative” (Bruner 1987), and one of its key arguments. I want to try out the idea that this article, far from expressing some permanent core of Bruner’s thought, remains a rare exception and largely unendorsed in Bruner’s later work. More specifically, I would like to claim *first* that Bruner’s position within “the metaphoric discourse on narrative” (which interprets human life, experience, action, identity, or self as narrative) is not nearly as unambiguous as the title of the article might imply, and *second* that the radical thesis, according to which “we,” by telling autobiographical narratives and experiencing the world through these stories, “become the narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (Bruner 1987, 15), is not endorsed but, rather, challenged in Bruner’s later work. Above all, his later thoughts on the play of folk psychological “canonicity” and its “breach” in actual narratives challenge the easy continuity between life and narrative.

Narrative as a metaphor of life has been a vital part of theorizing narrative in social research at least since Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. There is no modesty or hesitation in MacIntyre's famous argument, maintaining that "It is because we all *live out narratives* in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the *narratives that we live out* that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others" (MacIntyre 1984, 212; emphasis added). It is worth noticing that this argument already renders narrative a cognitive method in "understanding the action of others." In MacIntyre's moral philosophy, narrative has the special assignment to rescue contemporary culture from the reign of fragmentary individualism and to provide modern humans with life-long ethical coherence and identity. In the years that followed, this "story metaphor," characterized as "disarmingly simple" by Dan P. McAdams (1988, 17), became, in its different formulas, an important part of the emerging narrative psychology and, more generally, of narrative studies within the social sciences (e.g., Sarbin 1986; Carr 1986; Polkinghorne 1988; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992; Somers 1994; Bamberg 2004; Hänninen 2004; Hyvärinen 2006).

Characteristic of the early use of this metaphor was either a relatively thin narrative theory (with only a few theorists trying to draw ideas from literary or linguistic theories of narrative) or rather the adaptation of 'narrative' or 'story' as everyday terms, known to everyone, and thus in no need of further specification. The focal point of the metaphoric discourse was to revolutionize the way human action, identity and life was understood, and narrative provided here an important combination of temporal change and continuity. A self, for example, was no longer in terms of a fixed storage of characterological features, but as something that evolves, changes and adapts because of life occurrences. To aggravate the picture: the metaphoric discourse was not primarily interested in the study of narratives as such but in the use of them as a perspective and analytic model in the study of lives. For example, the basic narratological distinction between "story" (as an equivalent of the presumed sequence of events) and "narrative discourse" (as something actually

told, written or textually produced) is almost nonexistent within this discourse and social sciences in general. Narratives and lives can thus be easier understood as similar sequences of events.

There is little doubt then that this metaphoric discourse, taken together, includes an array of one-sided theses (e.g., on narrative coherence, conventionality and normativity) which motivate such criticism as proffered, for example, by Sartwell (2000), Strawson (2004), and Tammi (2006).

However, when Strawson frames his argument by maintaining that “[t]here is widespread agreement that human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories,” (428) he greatly exaggerates the scholarly importance and uniformity of narrative studies. Jerome Bruner, for example, has never represented the mainstream of psychology. The issue concerning who have actually agreed upon the abovementioned thesis—and where—remains ambiguous.

The circle of imitation

Bruner’s short, powerful and partly emblematic article “Life as Narrative” (Bruner 1987) has been both widely read and often difficult to grasp.¹ Bruner seems to have an established, unchallenged and often quoted position within the metaphoric discourse; however, on closer look it seems that Bruner takes up the metaphoric discourse, at least unambiguously, only in this article. Moreover, all other key authors of the metaphoric genre appear to be absent, not only before and after “Life as

¹ In my own reading history, the article has appeared to me at least as i) an argument for a constructionist view of autobiography; ii) as an argument for life as narrative, and iii) as an argument for the cognitive power of self-narration.

Narrative,” but even within the article itself.² Such “metaphoric” writers as Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), David Carr (1986) or Dan McAdams (1988, 1993), for example, do not profile at all in Bruner’s work. At least we can observe that there is no explicit recognition of the earlier (and clearly non-constructionist) theories on life as narrative in Bruner’s work. By contrast, there is no difficulty to find references to authors such as Hayden White, Roland Barthes, or Paul Ricoeur, who represent different or openly critical discourses. Bruner (1991, 5) also explicitly anchors himself to narratology and maintains that “the ancestry of many of the ideas that will concern me can be traced back directly to the debates that have been going on among literary theorists over the last decade or two.” Let me thus suggest, at least provisionally, that Bruner’s position as regards the metaphoric discourse is rather unstable.

Bruner opens his article invitingly, by maintaining that he “would like to try out an idea that may not be quite ready, indeed may not be quite possible” (1987, 11). The rhetorical confidence characteristic of MacIntyre’s contribution seems to be entirely lacking in Bruner’s opening. One of the first moves Bruner carries out is to take, as he puts it, “philosophically speaking,” a constructivist point of view, which is oriented towards “world making.” A bit later he once again points out that the telling of one’s life story is always “a cognitive achievement” rather than a “recital of something univocally given” (13). There is, then, an original distance or even gap between “life” and “life story”. Here, life does not mean such a seamless “living out” of narrative as it did in MacIntyre. But the very next twist is to consider critically the constructivist “view that ‘stories’ do not ‘happen’ in the real world but, rather, are constructed in people’s heads” (11). The

² There are, of course, references to such thinkers as philosopher Charles Taylor and the psychoanalyst Donald Spence, but not directly in the sense of endorsing the metaphoric discourse. However, the affirmative quotes from Roy Schafer and in particular Donald Polkinghorne in Bruner (1990, 112-116) may be said to contradict my general claim.

issue now is both about the extent of the gap just realized, and also the order of things. Do life stories simply and always just follow the “lived life” and “life experience”? At this point, for example, the reader might expect a reference to the previous metaphoric discourse on “living” narratives, but there is none. This fact may be just a curious co-incidence, but it may also imply that Bruner rather saw himself trying an idea that departed from the earlier formulations of living out narratives.

Following the ideas that Paul Ricoeur explores in *Time and Narrative*, Bruner suggests that “[w]e seem to have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of narrative³” (12). However, he does not stop here, but also takes on the other element of Ricoeur’s theory on mimesis (Ricoeur 1984, 54–86). Rephrasing Oscar Wilde Ricoeur suggests that “[n]arrative imitates life, life imitates narrative” (13). At this point of his argumentation, we thus have a mutual *relationship of imitation*. “Life” might then learn something vital from different narratives, from their story-level structures and possibilities of action and configurations of plots; it might also learn from characters and their different plights and decisions. On the level of discourse, individual “life” might possibly learn even from different genres, for example, by giving up visualizing one’s further action in terms of romance, and assuming instead the attitude of comedy or irony. Lisa Zunshine (2006, 16–22) even argues that humans often enjoy of “pretending” to be someone else – we all probably know the endless “pretend” plays of children of certain age – and that much of the enjoyment of reading fiction comes from this possibility to pretend to be in someone else’s mind and life.

³ It is noteworthy, however, that Bruner and Ricoeur understand temporality in unequal terms. For Bruner, sequentiality constitutes the core of temporality, whereas Ricoeur (1981, 1984) systematically criticized this structuralist tendency.

All this imitation is well known in literature, from Don Quixote to Madame Bovary, and there are writers such as Ian McEwan or Kazuo Ishiguro who almost constantly explore the ways characters fashion their lives and choices with the help of narrative models (see, e.g, Uddén in this issue). Bruner (2002, 96) takes one further step in this play of imitation and invokes the work of the prominent neuroscientist Merlin Donald who “suggests that the increase [in the size of the human brain] led not only to an improvement in hominid intelligence but, more specifically, to the emergence of a human ‘mimetic sense,’ a form of intelligence that enabled our ancestors to reenact or imitate events in the present or past.” Learning by imitation is much more effective in spreading cultural ideas than any formal procedure of trial and error, and imitation by narrative effectively transcends the limits of immediate situation. Understanding narrative imitation as a key form of human learning, however, has important consequences for Bruner’s earlier argumentation in a way I will return to shortly.

Experience, interpretation, and revision

Just as we have arrived at the point where life imitates narrative, Bruner again cunningly blurs further the relative clarity of this image by pointing out: “There is no such thing psychologically as ‘life itself’. At the very least, it is a selective achievement of memory recall; beyond that, recounting one’s life is an interpretive feat” (13). At the end of the article he reformulates the idea by maintaining that “a life as led is inseparable from a life told” (31). “Inseparable” is still a relatively broad analytic category, ranging from empirical overlapping to total confluence of these categories. In any case, there is thus no pure moment of experience, as Joan Scott so poignantly asserts, because “[e]xperience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation” (Scott 1998, 69). By substituting narrative for Scott’s interpretation, as one of its versions, we see that Scott’s and Bruner’s positions do not differ substantially here.

This position distinctly challenges what historians Louis Mink and Hayden White have argued.

“But to say that the qualities of narrative are transferred to art from life seems *a hysteron proteron*. Stories are not lived but told,” as Mink (1987, 60) has it; and thus “it seems truer to say that narrative qualities are transferred from art to life” (60), a transportation that is radically challenged in Bruner’s thought. White (1999, 9) later repeats Mink’s idea almost verbatim in maintaining that “stories are not lived; there is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found.” This is certainly true for the distant historical past, yet much more dubious in the case of individual lives and actually experienced history. What Mink and White have postulated is indeed a pre-existing “real,” a real event, a real and undistorted historical experience, which only later on becomes interpreted or moralized by beginnings, middles, and ends (White 1987). Bruner, instead, maintains that for an individual, at least, there is no equivalent of this pure “real” of existence devoid of interpretation. As he concludes, “Mind is never free of precommitment. There is no innocent eye, nor is there one that penetrates aboriginal reality” (32).

At the core of Bruner’s and Scott’s interpretation of experience is that it is neither a single, limited moment of time nor a moment of culturally and psychically pure rawness; no foundational experience. Strawson, instead, seems to play with such an option while foregrounding the theme of narrative revisionism: “According to *the revision thesis* Narrativity always carries with it some sort of tendency to revision, where revision essentially involves more merely [sic!] than changing one’s view of the facts of one’s life” (Strawson 2004, 443). This tendency is far from innocent, even ethically suspect, because at least some “think that revision is always charged, as I will say – always motivated by an interconnected core group of moral emotions including pride, self-love, conceit, shame, regret, remorse, and guilt” (444). No doubt this kind of morally and emotionally charged revisionism is always at work in autobiographical narration, in one form or another, and of course

Bruner's original idea of autobiography as a cognitive achievement highlights this very aspect. But in Bruner's perspective, the revision thesis is both all too narrow (the revision cannot be evaded, for example, by resorting to Strawson's "Episodic" consciousness), and all too broad while attaching the dubious aspects of autobiographical revision to narrativity in general, without any qualification. In Bruner's thought, experience is unavoidably a temporally extended phenomenon, making "revision" an integral element of interpretation and the process of experiencing itself.

In his critical essay, Galen Strawson (2004) suggested that "[t]he Episodic and Diachronic styles of temporal being are radically opposed" (430), without being absolute or exceptionless. He also believes that "being Diachronic is at least necessary for being Narrative." (432) As he has it, the "basic form of Diachronic self experience" implies that:

[D] one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future

Whereas one is Episodic,

[E] one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future. (430)

There is no doubt that Strawson succeeds in foregrounding profound differences in human understanding of temporality, and also in portraying some inherent and possibly not thoroughly discussed problems in narrative studies. I have no difficulty in tracing many Episodic in myself; for example I cannot claim an access to my authentic thoughts and feelings in my "further past," and I could rather easily portray "myself" as a line-up of different personalities. But from a constructionist point of view, that is, from the view Bruner shares, nothing can stop the

contemporary person from editing the features of those “past selves,” from adding odd or even objectionable features to those past figures. But most importantly, if we do not reserve the concept of narrative only for conventional, sequential, and continuous narratives – as Strawson (439) does – the Episodic style can be characterized as being one end on the narrative continuum⁴ (see Herman 2002 for such scales of narrativity).

Partly because of the flexible interpretive process and the impossibility of finding and fixing the moment or “reality” of “life itself,” life stories and autobiographies become, in Bruner’s analysis, “highly susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences” (14). Indeed, they are susceptible to emotionally and/or morally charged revision as well. While many early qualitative studies drew attention to the presumed “subjective meaning-making” or persons’ “own voices” in biographical interviews,⁵ Bruner’s cultural psychology unambiguously foregrounds the *shared* and *conventional* character of life stories. He explicitly challenges the view that “the narrative forms and the language that goes with them in our four subjects are [...] simply expressions of their internal states, ways of talk that are required by those internal states” (31). Revision of autobiographical telling is thus both charged and culturally conditioned.⁶

⁴ “As noted earlier, not all narratives are conventional [...] It is curious that theorists that much better nonetheless seem to assume the most conventional form of narrative (particularly nineteenth-century realism read in rather limited way) when they generalize about the nature of narrative, often to criticize its conventionality or ideological nature,” says Dominick LaCapra (2001, 63). Strawson’s rhetorical strategy is to list all non-conventional narratives under his heading of “Episodic” style. I disagree with this strategy but see that it can still render some problems and varieties of narrative studies visible.

⁵ See Gubrium and Holstein 2001 as a criticism of the romantic idea of one’s “own voice.”

⁶ Which does not mean that these documents were, by any means or automatically, inferior to other documents of history. I simply follow here Dominick LaCapra (2004) who writes on “transferral” relationships between historian and traumatizing events and historical documents. In a similar way, we are not free to look at our personal past “objectively,” without taking into account the complex emotional attachments to past events, persons, and situations.

Let us now take one step backwards in Bruner's argumentation. "Life as led," as we just learned, is inseparable from "life as told." Life stories are, in turn, not just expressions of internal states but "highly susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences" (14). If this is true, what happens to the experience—is it also culturally and interpersonally constituted, and if so, then how thoroughly? Indeed, Bruner seems to take a definite culturalist position here, and asserts:

The heart of my argument is this: eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very "events" of a life. In the end, *we become the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives.* (15, emphasis added)

At the center of this argument, we have the cognitive processes. These processes are culturally shaped, but to what extent and depth is not exactly explicated. These cognitive processes guide the self-telling of lives, but they also have the power to structure "perceptual experience" and to "organize memory." The general style of this structuring, in Strawson's terms, can be either Narrative or Episodic. Finally, they "segment" and emotionally charge, or color the "events" of a life, and so "we become the autobiographical narratives" we are telling. After all, the argument is not at all modest. However, Bruner's argument here does not give much space for Strawson's "ethical Narrativity thesis," which maintains that "experiencing or conceiving one's life as a narrative is a good thing; a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life" (428). Bruner's argument is thoroughly realistic in the sense of trying to capture how things are, not how they should be. His central point is that the revision of experience takes place, in many important ways, already before and during the experience, meaning that Strawson's "Narrative" and "Episodic" persons face similar problems of relativity of the experience. "Experience is a subject's history," as

Scott (1998, 66) says, and therefore “not the origin [or foundation] of our explanation, but that which we want to explain” (69).

Yet I am somewhat puzzled by the outcome of Bruner’s argumentation. When he challenges the purity of experience and “life itself,” when he outlines the cognitive pre-shaping of experience, he opens a rich and reflexive conceptual network and helps to resist what Scott calls a foundationalist⁷ view on experience (Scott 1998; cf. LaCapra 2004, 35–38). By maintaining that we *become* the autobiographical narratives we tell, I am afraid that he betrays this dialectic for a kind of narrative totalization. Quite astonishingly, a flexible and reflexive network seems to be reversed and resembles instead a closed-circuit argumentative model. The argument even opens the possibility of reading the title of the article in the strong form “Life as *a* narrative.” Of course it is technically possible to unpack the original plural expression into a singular proposition: “A person becomes the autobiographical narratives he or she is telling,” however, had this been Bruner’s original intention, he would probably had formulated this argument less ambiguously. Instead of providing *multiple sets* of cognitive resources, narrative indeed seems to impose a fixed and quasi-deterministic form.

The decisive passage seems to enable at least two contradictory interpretations with regard to the limits of agency. According to the darker, deterministic reading, the culturally shaped cognitive-cum-linguistic processes take control over individual life, making life follow the model of an articulated autobiography. The optimistic reading, by contrast, empowers the individual at the moment of telling, giving the individual narrator profound powers to create his or her life with the help of cultural resources of self-narration. Of course we may think that Bruner, as a constructionist, simply argues that life cannot be experienced and interpreted but discursively, and thus through

⁷ Scott argues that experience “is one of the foundations that have been reintroduced into historical writing in the wake of critique of empiricism; unlike “brute fact” or “simple reality,” its connotations are more varied and elusive.” (60) It is easy to recognize that “experience” may receive similar foundational and unquestioned position within cultural studies as well.

narrative forms. If so, why only autobiographical narratives, and why only the autobiographical narratives “we” are already telling?

In what follows, firstly, I will try to locate the background of this strong argument that we “become” the autobiographical narratives we are telling, and to consider ways of unpacking the obvious determinacy of the model; secondly, I will try to locate some of the ways Bruner himself revised this idea in his later work.

The formalist legacy

One of Bruner’s undeniable merits—as a psychologist—is his exceptional reading of literature and theory of literature. At the time that he originally surveyed literary theory of narrative, structuralist thought dominated the field. In *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, he introduces the idea of narrative form very powerfully: “Literary theorists as various as Victor Turner (an anthropologist), Tzvetan Todorov, Hayden Whiten (an historian), and Vladimir Propp (a folklorist) suggest that there is *some such constraining deep structure to narrative*, and that good stories are well-formed particular realizations of it” (Bruner 1986, 16, emphasis added). Bruner is alert enough to see that all writers do not share this view, but I assume that this structuralist emphasis on narrative form and deep structure is very decisive for his argument in general. The end of the above quote introduces a particularly alarming conclusion while it presumes that there are some “good stories” which are “well-formed realizations” of the narrative deep-structure. Are we then entitled to develop normative criteria for good life stories and perhaps for lives as well?

In “Life as Narrative,” Bruner repeats the same theme of strong narrative form. Now he takes Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* as his blueprint, and says:

Vladimir Propp's classic analysis of folktales reveals, for example, that the *form* of a folktale may remain unchanged even though its content changes. So too self-told life narratives may reveal a common formal structure across a wide variety of content. (17)

A Russian wondertale, the only category of data Propp (1984) claims to have theorized, is of course generically quite a distance from contemporary self-narration and consequently subject to more pressing and at least different conventional rules than that of the life story. Bruner's oeuvre is full of references to modernist literature, much more so than is usual in social sciences, yet at this point of his argument he takes the forms of the sub-genre of folktales as the pilot case of his analysis. Indeed, if we first assume the existence of a "constraining deep structure to narrative," believe in its realization in "well-formed" and "good" stories and assume the Proppian idea of the permanence of form through a variety of narratives, the grand vision of the formative power of autobiography is not necessarily surprising. Even though the ideas of cultural psychology and the early cognitive revolution permeate Bruner's work, it is as revealing and relevant to recognize the significant remains of structuralist and formalist thought.

The Self of the early narrative psychology

The way we understand narrative conceptually (for example, as the realization of a permanent structure or as a relatively open multitude of options) is vital for the further understanding of narrative's cognitive role. On my analysis, Bruner's article suggests, in its key formulation, a problematic integration of "cognitive processes" with "autobiographical narrative." If the argument would really hold water, the importance of the study of autobiography would of course be momentous. The argument encompasses, I think, a good quantity of the "narrative imperialism"

James Phelan (2005) has criticized. Bruner is working to explore the momentous cognitive role of narrative, and the autobiographical narrative in particular, and due to the ambitious scope of his argument he seems to fail defining the limits of his argument.

At first, Bruner's key argument presents "cognitive processes" that guide the "self-telling of life narratives"; later we *become* these narratives as self-guiding elements. However, a large and decisive amount of our cognitive processing with narratives is about *receiving* an almost unending multitude of different narratives.⁸ Many of the received narratives are incoherent, unfinished, and episodic, sometimes portraying the weak narrativity of "a boring story" (Tammi 2006). This is of course also at the core of the idea of narrative as a method of imitation and learning that Bruner (2002) uses in his later work, because imitation is not a very powerful intellectual tool if we imitate one and the same narrative (form) we have already used. Much of the cognitive power of narratives also derives from the non-actual options they offer, and from the imagination they are able to facilitate. Zunshine (2006) even says that precisely this imagination or pretending to be someone else is a key reason why we want to read fiction. Fictional narratives offer as the option to be momentarily someone else and imagine this someone else's feelings and thoughts.

The other side of this conflation of cognition and autobiography seems to bestow an unwarranted privilege to autobiographical, life-long narratives. The early days of narrative psychology often

⁸ Here variety must concern both form and content. When Strawson (2004, 439), for example, says "the paradigm of a narrative is a conventional story told in words. I take the term to attribute – at the very least – a certain sort of *developmental* and hence temporal *unity* or *coherence* to the things to which it is standardly applied – lives, part of lives, pieces of writing," he oddly seems to share Bruner's problematic conception of a "good story." If we lift the necessary conditions of "conventionality" and "temporal unity" from the model, much of Strawson's binary opposition between "Narrative" and "Episodic" understandings collapses as well. See for example Herman (2007, 7) for an entirely different prototype of narrative.

witnessed this generalization: narrative for the human self and the human self as a narrative specifically mean life-long narratives. Donald E. Polkinghorne lucidly expresses this bias (“Narrative” against “Episodic” understanding of the self, in Strawson’s terms) by maintaining:

The position taken in this study is that *we* achieve *our* personal identities and self concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence *into a whole* by understanding it as an expression of *a single unfolding and developing story*. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. (Polkinghorne 1988, 150, emphasis added)

As many authors have in recent years suggested, identities are also formed and played out in many kinds of “small” and naturally-occurring narratives (Ochs and Capps 2001; Bamberg 2004, 2006; Georgakopoulou 2007). Even autobiographical narration can be theorized as a much more situational and collaborative endeavor than simply as a controlled repetition of a complete autobiographical narrative in different versions. This pluralist view on self-narration of course explodes the vision of a compelling, complete narrative that starts to dominate human perception, experience, and understanding of one’s own agency. However, there are still important schools in the study of biography which see it as a necessary context for the smaller stories, and argue that the study of partial stories “first take place after the entire life story’s structure or Gestalt and the whole life narrative has been taken into consideration” (Rosenthal 2003, 917). If I understand Strawson correctly, he would argue that precisely this “entire life story structure or Gestalt” is a purely contingent phenomenon, typical for “Narrative” characters. But within this early horizon of Narrative Self, Bruner’s radical argument apropos of “to become” may simply indicate the way in which the individual’s “psychic reality” and the autobiographical narrative will be conflated

together. Unfortunately, this would still be a narrow view as well on the level of psychological reality and the functions of self-narration.

Canonicity and breach

To my knowledge, Bruner explicitly returned neither to the idiom “life as narrative,” nor to the key thesis in which “we become” the narratives we tell about our own lives. His *Acts of Meaning* (1990) gives a fuller account on his study of the Goodhertz family and, in this sense, seamlessly continues his earlier work. *Acts of Meaning* broadly endeavors to rehabilitate the ideas of the early Cognitive Revolution, as he has it, before the concept of “information processing” replaced the original role of “meaning-making.” Bruner now locates the cognitive role of narrative primarily on the level of “folk psychology,” maintaining that people ordinarily presume that other people have minds, purposes, and desires, and are thus read against the background of inherited narratives. Autism, at least in the version of Asperger syndrome, deviates precisely from this aspect of folk psychological presumptions (see Zunshine 2007, 6-12; Freissman, in this issue). Daniel Hutto (2008, 7) formulates the same idea by saying: “Folk psychology just is the practice of making sense of intentional action by means of a special kind of narrative, those that are about or feature a person’s reasons.”

The idea of folk psychology leads Bruner to argue the role of narrative from an entirely new perspective. As he says,

Folk psychology is invested in canonicity. It focuses upon the expectable and/or the usual in the human condition. It endows these with legitimacy or authority. (Bruner 1990, 47)

Here we have an interesting dilemma indeed: as Bruner and Hutto maintain, the folk psychology is organized in a narrative rather than in a propositional form, and these “folk psychological narratives function as normalizing explanations” (Hutto 2008, 7). The role of real narratives with regard to these normative expectations is equally important. Bruner’s key idea is repeated: “[I]t is only when constituent beliefs in a folk psychology are violated that narratives are constructed” (39); *“The function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern”* (49-50, emphasis in the original).

Even though Bruner himself does not follow all the potential trajectories of this argument, it radically undermines the power of the metaphorical discourse, and challenges the earlier discussion on autobiography. “Living out a narrative” can only refer to the cultural-cum-personal level of narrative canonicity. The aspect of “breach” once again introduces the unexpected openness of experience. True, actual narratives are told because everything did not go the way the canonical narratives presume and dictate. If we radicalize the new role of the “breach,” we may want to challenge the presumed, quasi-universal and automatic role of autobiography as well, in the sense that the extent of experienced breaches may lead to different pressures for autobiographical processing.

A cultural script might be another name for particular and regional versions of the folk psychological canonicity (cf. Herman 2002). “Living out a narrative” (MacIntyre), or the idea to “become the autobiographical narratives by which tell about our lives” (Bruner), or “Self as a narrative” (Polkinghorne) all foreground, and quite obviously against the authors’ original intentions, the folk psychological canonicity, or presuming life to follow the model of cultural-cum-personal scripts. The fundamental shortcoming of the metaphoric discourse, from this perspective, is to conflate analytically the canonical, scripted narrativity with actual narratives and narration.

Scripts, plans, and all other possible forms of canonical narrativity structure events, goals, intentions, desires, and outcomes in sequential, chronological order; in short, they utilize the cognitive resources of narrativity; but after all, “they do not constitute narrativity itself” (Bruner 1991, 11). For these reasons, I conclude, Bruner’s ideas about folk psychology and the play of canonicity and breach constitute a remarkable shift in his own thought, and enable entirely new perspectives regarding many of the original ideas within narrative psychology.

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