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Role Models in Cognitive Psychology: Jerome Bruner as Exemplar

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An examination of Jerome Bruner's intellectual ontogenesis elucidates how cognitive psychologists can generate both good theory and practice during their careers. Bruner challenges psychologists to expand what they see as the focus of their discipline and to actively work for social change. In his early work Bruner challenged the behaviorists. Today he challenges the cognitive psychologists. His challenges are not just about theoretical concerns but about the basic nature of science itself. He calls for a compassionate view of science.

In the 1950s he used evidence from his research to show that people seem to have strategies in their heads that they use to help them categorize information in the world. Thus he along with such thinkers as Chomsky and Miller) challenged behaviorism. Scientists had to acknowledge the existence of mental structures which their then current theories of s-r chains could not explain. This allowed Bruner to argue that the study of structures of the mind is a valid scientific enterprise. Hence, rational thinking could after almost 50 years be re-introduced as a concept to be studied by experimental psychology. Subsequently, Bruner could use the study of 'rational thought' as the basis for 'compassionate' pedagogical and curricular reform.

In the 1980s and 1990s Bruner has again focused on new ways of studying/conceptualizing cognitive processes, that allows him to challenge a current and reductionistic view of human consciousness. Interestingly, by doing this he challenges the very cognitive view he helped create. By focusing on stories as cognitive structures, whose complexity as multidimensional schemas can not easily be reproduced or reduced to computer models, he forces cognitive psychologists, especially those of the 'hard core' AI variety, to acknowledge limitations to their field. In so doing Bruner re-introduces culture and meaning into psychology and he makes psychology more compassionate by refocusing it on personal experience.

Philosophically, Bruner's thought has transformed from a rationalism tinged with empiricism to a hermeticism laced with empiricism. One can see that this involved; a) Bruner's attempting, through empirical methods, to get the reductionist behaviorists of the 1950s to acknowledge the legitimacy of rationalist claims that mental phenomena existed in the head, and b) attempting to get contemporary 1990s reductionist cognitive psychologists, again through empirical methods, to acknowledge the legitimacy of the hermetic approach.

This is not to suggest Bruner has evolved into some form of 'Pure Platonist'. He doesn't believe mind can be divorced from the world. Mind, in theory, may be able to generate an infinite diversity of worlds. But, in practice it is limited by the practical necessity of the environment within which it finds itself. Hence, Bruner's constructivism is infused with

the functional perspective. Moreover, this evolution from functional rationalism to functional hermeticism (i.e. constructivism) has gone, hand in hand, with Bruner's use of a constantly expanding multidisciplinary perspective.

Through biographical analysis we can appreciate how Bruner challenges the limits of what psychology defines as its methods and as its 'field of application'. Also, we can see how Bruner transforms himself into a new form of scientist. Bruner recognizes the cultural and social boundedness of his own discipline and, he consciously synthesizes both theory and practice in an effort to make psychology a more humane science. His intellectual career serves as an exemplar for young scientists just entering the field.

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