Summary Article: Bruner, Jerome
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The psychologist, philosopher, and pragmatist Jerome Bruner (b. 1915) has borne witness to the wide-ranging and wild enthusiasms of the field of psychology—behaviorist, cognitivist, cultural, developmental—for more than 65 years. Repeatedly, he has played important roles in authoring and critiquing his field (including his own earlier work), fearless in his embrace of the complexity of the human condition and vigilant in considering how social science can shape and be shaped by important social issues. His research included work on how people process information and on the early development of spoken language. This entry discusses the breadth of Bruner's research, his political involvement in education, and his influence on psychology and education.

Born in New York City, with degrees from both Duke University (BA, 1937, Psychology) and Harvard University (MA, 1939; PhD, 1941, Psychology), Bruner has held positions at Harvard, Oxford, the New School of Social Research, and New York University. His oeuvre includes 20 books on topics ranging from cognition and learning, to knowing and meaning, to narrative and language, to education and law. The Process of Education (1963), his summary of a summit meeting of leading scientists and social scientists drawn together to respond to the “missile gap” crisis in the wake of Russia's launch of Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite, has been translated into 21 languages. Drawing widely on disciplinary tools from anthropology, psychology, linguistics, and literary theory, and consistently embedding himself within interdisciplinary communities, Bruner has always exhibited an esprit de finesse—the ability to hold together a number of elements in nice balance—understanding that an infinite range of factors, known and unknown, shape the human condition (Geertz, 1997).

Bruner started his career at Harvard with a study of the “helplessness” of imprisoned rats. He quickly became part of the generation of psychologists in the 1950s who brought the mind back into the discipline “after a long cold winter of objectivism” (Bruner, 1990, p. 1). Rejecting studies of stimuli and responses, Bruner and his colleagues were taken with understanding how people reason, feel, imagine, and know. As cognitive studies—a field he helped create—grew, Bruner became a strong critic of how cognitive “science” had—ironically enough—dehumanized the mind, virtually estranging psychology from the arts and humanities.

In response, Bruner eventually helped lead a “cultural” revolution within psychology, drawing heavily on anthropology and arguing that the mind is not “programmable” but rather is a social and historical achievement. In his own research, Bruner sought to understand how language develops (especially among the young) and how cultures shape the mind. Central to this has been his work on narrative and how cultures and individuals use stories to shape their own and others’ lives. Bruner has been honored with 25 honorary degrees, a Festschrift (Olson, 1980), a volume of essays on his philosophy (Bakhurst & Shanker, 2001), and the International Balzan Prize (in 1987); he is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Major Themes

In the 1950s, Bruner was one of several early leaders of psychology's cognitive revolution. Instead of focusing on stimulus and response, and operant and classical conditioning, Bruner and his colleagues—Ulric Neisser, Donald Broadbent, George A. Miller, and Noam Chomsky among them—sought to
describe how humans made meaning from their encounters with the world. Based on earlier empirical work that he had done on children's perceptions, Bruner supported a "New Look" psychology that focused on humans' interpretations of events and objects, rather than simply documenting their observed responses to stimuli. In *A Study in Thinking* (Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956), Bruner and his colleagues reported on a series of groundbreaking studies on human concept formation and inductive reasoning, and the work is considered a classic in the so-called cognitive turn in psychology. Shortly afterward, Bruner and Miller founded Harvard's Center of Cognitive Studies, which became a leading think tank for interdisciplinary teams of anthropologists, linguists, historians, philosophers, and psychologists who were documenting how humans make meaning.

By his own account, Bruner's (2006a) interest in education arose in the 1950s as he witnessed the "desperate ideological struggles" of the time. When Sputnik was launched, concerns about science education rose, with U.S. policymakers arguing that the "missile gap" between the Soviet Union and the United States was a national, political, and intellectual threat. The National Science Foundation responded, supporting numerous curriculum development projects that involved research scientists and mathematics around the country. Bruner, who had been pulled into helping Jerrold Zacharias at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) with his Physical Science Study Committee work, was invited to cochair (with Zacharias) a meeting convened at Woods Hole, Massachusetts, in which the investigators on these projects deliberated about curriculum, the role of cognitive psychology in education, and the future of mathematics and science education. This led to one of Bruner's most important works, *The Process of Learning*, and later to his work on the development of the controversial social studies curriculum, *Man: A Course of Study* (MACOS). MACOS, which was based on Bruner's idea of a "spiral" curriculum, was a humanities program meant to teach students about the life spans of living things—from salmon to reindeer to humans. The curriculum was designed to provoke students to ask questions, including questions about morality. Fundamentalist groups, in particular, raised rancorous objections, as documented in the film *Through These Eyes* (2004). Not one to shy away from controversy, Bruner became increasingly aware of the political currents that swirl around educational initiatives. His baptism by fire through MACOS appears to have only deepened his commitment to proactively engage in the politics of education: Throughout the 1960s, he served as a member of the Educational Panel of the President's Science Advisory Committee to both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

Bruner's interests in cognition and meaning making then led him to investigate the conditions for the early development of spoken language. His research convinced him that young children are powerfully proactive in their own learning and capable of developing conceptual powers at a young age. That work also taught him the damaging effects of poverty on early mental development. As a consequence, he was among the social scientists who argued for what became the Head Start program. While his own work led him to chafe at the "deprivation" theory that animated some of the federal Head Start work, Bruner was vehement in his conviction that poverty was the enemy of young children's minds.

In the 1970s, Bruner continued this empirical, theoretical, and political work in Great Britain, where he taught at Oxford and teamed up with colleagues, including Harry Judge, to work in the Preschool Research Group and later with the Preschool Playgroup Association. Here too, social scientists and humanists investigated young children, language, and development and worked to persuade the then minister of education, Margaret Thatcher, of the critical role of preschools in young children's development. As had been the case in the United States, while at Oxford, Bruner swam in the broader
intellectual currents of the time, most notably the linguistic turn in Oxford philosophy, which led him to reconsider how communicative intentions shape language use and structure. The combination of theoretical and empirical work shed new light for Bruner on how cultures shape the mental development of their members, including children. This work eventually led to the “cultural” revolution in psychology, a shift that pressed for a conception of the self that acknowledged how our selves are not “isolated nuclei of consciousness” but instead are constructed by society and history (Bruner, 1990).

On returning to the United States in the 1980s, Bruner moved back to New York City, where he joined the faculty of the New School for Social Research and later the faculty at New York University, where he is currently a member of both the Department of Psychology and the School of Law. Drawing again from broader intellectual currents, he then used the writing of authors like Julian Barnes, Milan Kundera, and Jacques Derrida to consider the role of narrative in meaning making. Bruner (1996) became convinced that human beings “live in a sea of stories” (p. Contributions of the Cognitive Revolution), most often authored by the cultures in which we live. His recent work (e.g., Bruner, 2003) explores how we learn through the stories we tell and are told.

A restless thinker, play has always been an important theme in Bruner’s work. He saw play as a way to tap into our cognitive powers and rethink possibility. This playfulness has led him to ignore boundaries—between conceptual and empirical work and between disciplines and fields of study. He has been, at once, an intellectual—trying on ideas from across fields, ever vigilant about the limitations any scholar faces in explaining something as complex as the mind and how one constructs meaning or learns—and an activist/teacher, whether proposing theories of instruction, creating curricula, or arguing for programs like Head Start. And the stories Bruner has told us—about the mind, about children, about teaching and learning, about narrative and culture—have shaped contemporary psychology and education in profound ways.

See also Cognitive Revolution and Information Processing Perspectives; Knowledge, Structure of: From Aristotle to Bruner and Hirst; Narrative Research

Further Readings


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