Jerome S. Bruner: Paradigmatic vs. Narrative Thought
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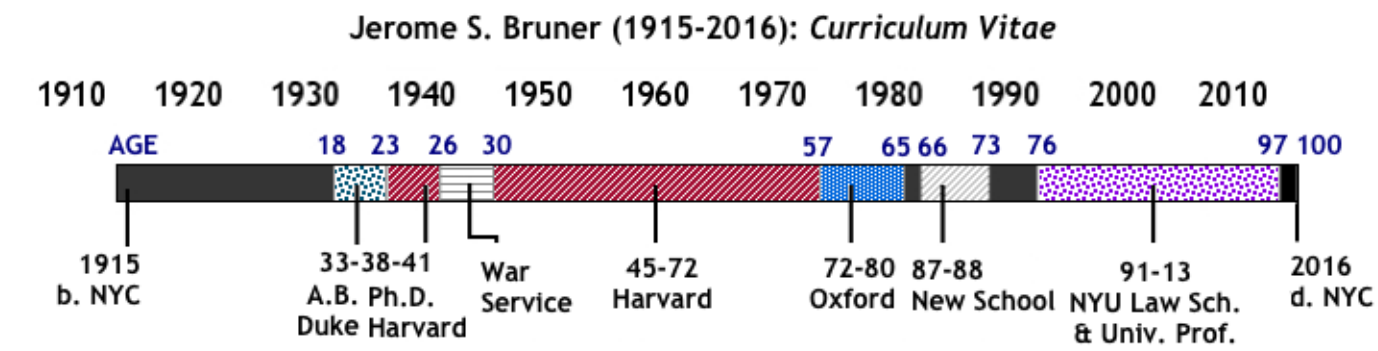
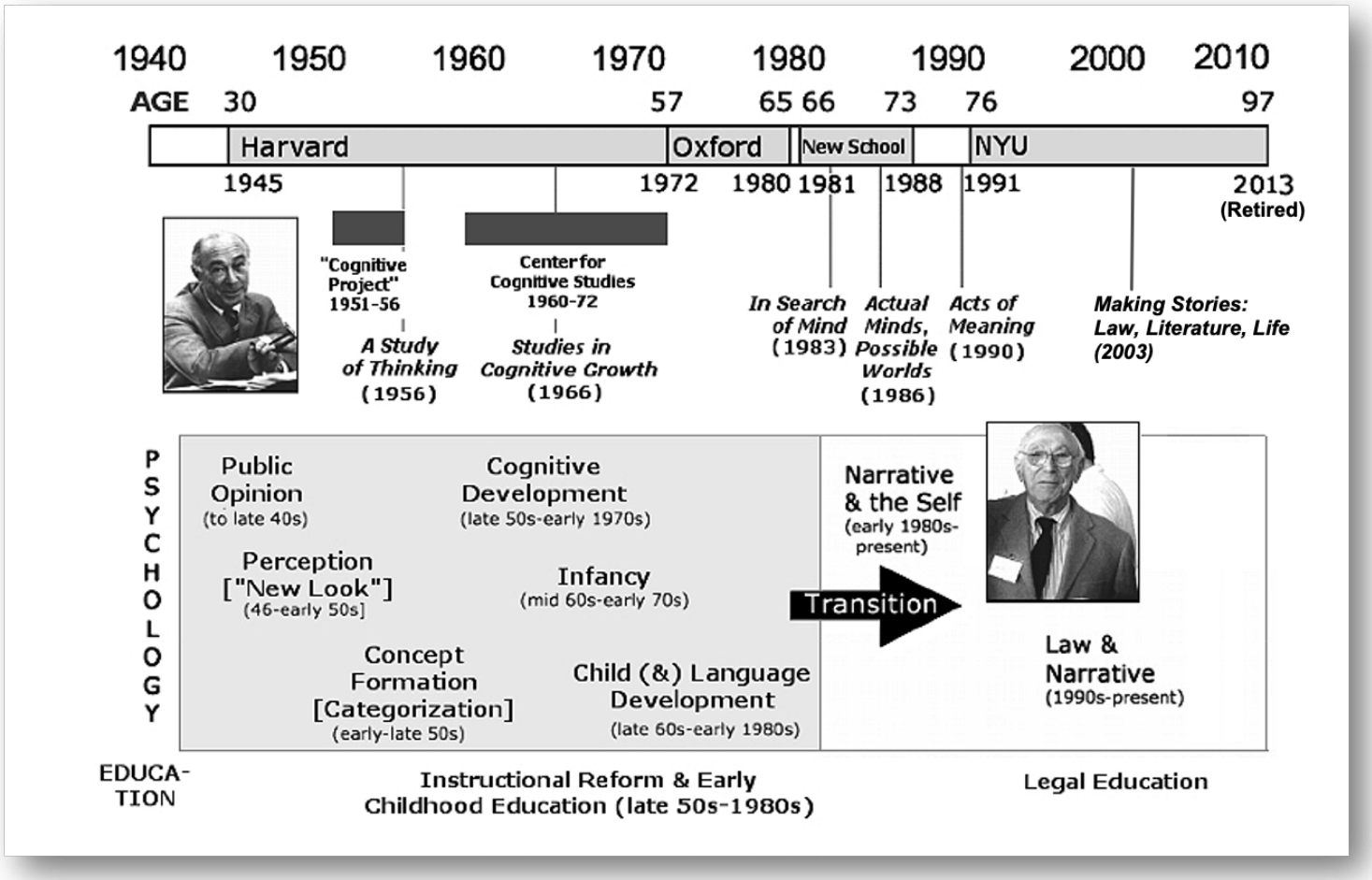
Professor Jerome Seymour Bruner was born in New York City on October 1, 1915 to Polish Jewish immigrants. There are stories galore about Jerry Bruner. In many of them he appears in the guise of a larger-than-life figure. In one tale, I heard him describe the 1946 US Congressional campaign: He interpreted polling data from the local congressional district around Harvard University as supportive of John F. Kennedy in his first run for office. He told Kennedy that he ought to run and, by implication, affected the course of modern American history! His partnership with George Miller resulted in the founding of the Center for Cognitive Studies (CCS) at Harvard in 1960, the first formal American educational institute reflecting the emerging cognitive understanding in psychology. He was one of a handful of influential psychologists who helped found the Head Start program to promote early childhood education in the United States in the early 1960s. In a well-known story that he recounts in his autobiography (Bruner, 1983, p. 285), the 67-year-old Bruner decided to take up residence at Oxford University by sailing his own ship, the *Wester Til*, across the Atlantic Ocean. In April 2004, a case involving an American national of Saudi origin was being heard in front of the United States Supreme Court -- a case in which Bruner worked with the defense attorneys. More than 50 years ago, he had similarly testified in a case (*Gebhart v. Belton*, 1952) which laid the factual groundwork for the eventual overturn of school segregation in the US in the famous 1954 decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*. In short, Jerry Bruner has led an amazingly productive and adventurous life. It is almost natural, then, that he would turn to narrative as a form of human understanding in his eight decade and elaborate that turn in his tenth decade of life. He himself tells wonderful stories all the time. Jerry, as he was known by all, lived to be over 100 years old and died on June 5, 2016 after a short illness.

*** Note I took the photograph of Bruner and Ted Sarbin above at the 1st Conference on Narrative Medicine at Columbia University in May 2003. It was the first time they had seen each other in person since 1950.





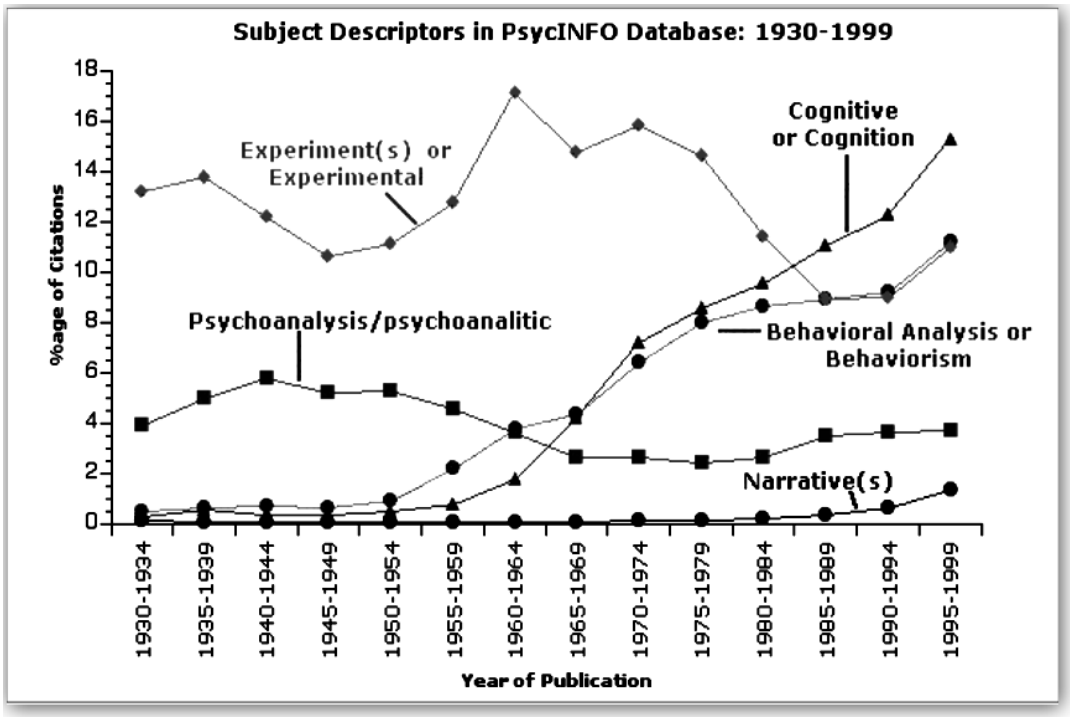
When Bruner left Duke University with his undergraduate degree in 1937, he entered the graduate program in psychology at Harvard University. There he studied with some of the psychologists who dissented from the standard model of psychology. Besides the staunchly experimental (and brilliant) E. G. Boring and S. S. Stevens, Bruner also sat in classes under the direction of Gordon Allport who was skeptical of the exclusive claims made by the experimental model. He denies, however, that Allport then influenced him with any great force: "I liked his broad scholarship, his attempts to link up with contemporary psychological theory. But though I became one of his 'students' and we spent much time together talking shop and collaborating on research, he did not have a deep effect on my style of thinking" (Bruner, 1983, p. 36). Nonetheless, Bruner did participate in a famous seminar in 1940 run by Allport in which the class sought to understand more deeply the individual life by means of studying autobiographical and other life document data. Further, one of Bruner's earliest published works (Bruner & Allport, 1940) was "an analysis of 14 key psychology journals over the half-century prior to

1939 in terms of what they published, [their] research methodologies, etc. This work served as the evidentiary backdrop for Allport's 1939 APA presidential address. The changes detailed in this period suggested to the authors that psychology would have to determine whether it would move beyond the increasingly animal- and laboratory-oriented research toward a greater concern with human issues" (Hevern, 2004). This talk of Allport's was a fiercely etched challenge to the narrowness of the then prevailing forms of experimentalism in social science.

The "New Look" in Psychology. When Bruner returned from service during World War II to join the Harvard faculty in 1945, he began a career in Cambridge, Massachusetts which stretched over 27 years. Very early in that career, he and his colleague, Leo Postman, published a short methodological article (Postman & Bruner, 1946) which would be the first of 17 they would collaborate on in the next decade. Bruner and Postman began to challenge the notion that perception is essentially free of influence by internal mental factors. They examined how errors of estimation in the real world appeared to vary neither constantly nor randomly *across* stimuli, but rather as a function of how valuable the stimulus was in the mind of the evaluator. In this paper they referred to research later reported in Bruner & Goodman (1947). In that study, both rich and poor children who were asked to estimate the physical size of coins -- 1 cent, 5 cents, 25 cents, 50 cents -- overestimated their size in proportion to the value of the coins themselves. 50 cent pieces were *overestimated* in size while 5 cent pieces were *underestimated*. Further, poorer children overestimated more than rich children did.

What was launched in these 1940s experiments was the so-called "New Look" in psychology in which cognitive factors would be adduced to explain more comprehensively the phenomena of psychophysics and behaviorism. Previously, both foundational subfields of experimental psychology were thought to be free of influence by some type of "internal" element. Nonetheless, Bruner and his colleagues went on to demonstrate how linguistic elements at a pre-perceptual level clearly *influenced what and how visual data would be comprehended* (Bruner, 1992). Thus, Bruner would argue that the "New Look" as it was styled "was the new mentalism on its way to becoming the Cognitive Revolution...Its principal questions have always been how and where selective processes operate in perception" (Bruner, 1992, Abstract).

A Cognitive Revolution? The "Cognitive Revolution" is the name which has subsequently been applied to the emergence in psychology of the study of internal mental functions and operations during the 1950s and 1960s (see Gardner, 1985). The figure at the top of the next page shows the appearance of certain keywords in PsycINFO®, the major database of research in psychology. Note that research involving "cognition" or "cognitive" as keywords began to grow rapidly during the 1960s. Before 1960, less than 1.5% of all psychological research concerned cognitive issues. By 1970-1974, that percentage had risen to more than 7% and by 1995-1999, more than 15% of all research in psychology was cognitive in nature. Yet, contrary to what some have held, it does not appear that the so-called "Cognitive Revolution" came at the expense of behaviorism which continued to receive a great deal of research attention to the end of the 20th century.



Bruner's work during the 1950s and, particularly, the 1960s lay the foundation for a great deal of this growth in studying cognitive phenomena. Throughout his efforts, Bruner was concerned with "how the mind begins" as he entitled one of the chapters in his 1988 autobiography. It is notable that Bruner mentions having attended a seminar at Duke as an undergraduate led by the German émigré, Wilhelm Stern. (It was Stern with whom Allport stayed in Germany as newly minted Ph.D. in the early 1920s and whom Allport helped find employment when he fled the Nazis in the 1930s.] Stern offered that seminar a contrast between personal phenomenological approaches to space and time and the more abstract formulation of Newton (Bruner, 1983, p. 132-133). That the exigencies of life -- the influence of social factors and experiences -- could affect the course of mental development was an implication of Stern's teaching at Duke and, more importantly, the thrust of the work of Lev Vygotsky whom Bruner came to read in the early 1960s. The intermediary in this turn toward Soviet psychology was the great neuropsychologist, Alexander Luria, the most loyal and famous of Vygotsky's students as well as a guest of Bruner's at Harvard in 1960. Bruner and Luria became very close friends for the remaining years of Luria's life (he died in 1977). While acknowledging some of the more cherished ideas of Jean Piaget about the development of a child's mind in stages, Bruner turned toward Vygotsky's work on the role of language in fostering the emerging mind of a child. Bruner took his earlier ideas about modes of representation in a child's mind -- *enactive*, *iconic*, and *symbolic* -- and turned these into a developmental stage theory of his own. The final stage, the acquisition of *symbolic representation* abilities, "provided the means whereby culture and cognitive growth made contact" (Bruner, 1983, p. 143). Hence, Bruner was able to embrace a more fully contextual approach to cognitive development than Piaget's theory ever contemplated.

Language and Infancy. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, Bruner explored how the infant coped with the world and found that their abilities were "far more competent, more active, more organized than had been thought before" (Bruner, 1983, p. 150). As he did so, he developed an increasingly powerful interest in the role of language acquisition as a basis of mind. Eventually, Bruner notes, "I came

to the conclusion that the need to use language fully as an instrument for participating in a complex culture (just as the infant uses it to enter the simple culture of his surround) is what provides the engine for language acquisition. The genetic 'program' for language is only half the story. The support system is the other half" (Bruner, 1983, p. 173). That support system includes the broad range of language-using entities which/whom a person encounters during development. Thus, families and friends, acquaintances at school and at play, all the many relationships one has during a life provide a rich set of linguistic communities which foster the growth of language and, thus, of mind in every person.

The Turn to Narrative. Bruner's approach to narrative appears to have had its origin in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As he details in "Ornaments of Consciousness," (the eleventh chapter of his autobiography), he had speculated on the *role of consciousness* for many years: why had it developed in the human species? what might be its ultimate function? and so on. Bruner believes that consciousness is a tool which helps people understand the world better. Using this tool, we have come to understand, explain, "demystify" the phenomena of our world. There seem to be, Bruner argues, two ways of going about demystification:

> One uses the apparatus of explanation, of cause-and-effect, of logical entailment, and in its most refined form, mathematics...It is Vygotsky's 'scientific thinking,' Piaget's 'formal operations,' James Mark Baldwin's 'propositional mode.' Then, there is the other mode. It tells a story; it is textual rather than logical. It does not deal in paradigms like perfectly round balls rolling down frictionless planes or the strict implication of the logician's 'iff,' his 'if and only if.' It is not that this mode does not have its rules, for the syntax of sentences, the constraints of dialogue and the grammar of stories are all demonstrable...Stories have a craft, even a pure form' (Bruner, 1983, p. 204).

In 1986, Bruner formalized this idea into the argument that there are two modes of thought, two irreducible ways of making sense of the world. The first is the **paradigmatic** or logico-mathematical approach to explanation. Here are all the rules of logic and scientific evidence. The second mode is **narrative** in which story construction and telling makes sense of the "vicissitudes of human intention". Bruner (1986) further argued that these two modes were mutually exclusive and neither reducible to the other. As the title of his 1986 volume of essays denotes, a primary function of narrative is to open up "possible worlds" by means of imaginative exploration. Rather than human persons finding themselves trapped in the factual reality of the given world, the storied imagination is able to conjure up alternative ways that reality might be structured. As Bruner is fond of saying, this is thinking "in the subjunctive mood."[1]

In his small but magisterial ***Acts of Meaning***, Bruner (1990) published the four lectures he gave in Jerusalem at the Hebrew University during December 1989 and situated his embrace of narrative within a broad program on behalf of cultural

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[1] In an April 2004 talk and discussions at the College of the Holy Cross and Clark University in Worcester, MA, Bruner must have made that assertion regarding the "subjunctive" at least three times in my own hearing.

psychology. The first chapter of this text, "The Proper Study of Man," begins with his assessment of the Cognitive Revolution: It failed ultimately to address the fundamental psychological problem of human beings by embracing the mechanical metaphor of the **computer** and the human person as an **information processing** entity. By taking this wrong turn, the social sciences pushed aside the central question of ***human intentionality*** or ***agency***. Human persons use the symbol systems around them, preeminently found in language, to make meaning of their world. And rather than being shaped primarily by genetic inheritance (which do provide constraints), the mind is predominantly constituted by the forces of culture broadly embraced. When interacting in the social world, people use their culture's "folk psychology"[2] or theory of intentionality in order to interpret the behavior of their social partners and to formulate behaviors in return. Yet, the paradigmatic form of psychological science avoids looking too closely at folk psychologies because they are seen to be "subjective" and too amorphous for proper analysis. Yet, at its heart, folk psychology provides individuals with the cognitive or mental tools with which they can understand their worlds.

In the second chapter of his (1990) volume, "Folk Psychology as an Instrument of Culture," Bruner advances the proposition that we can only understand human behavior by (1) understanding intentional states and (2) turning to the symbolic systems of a culture which shape or construct those intentionalities. Such symbolic systems rest of four general foundations: language, modes of discourse, forms of logical and narrative explanation, and patterns of mutually-dependent communal life. The human person within culture must be understood as using a "transactional" rather than "individual" mind, that is, from the moment of conception forward, the human being functions within cultural contexts and can never be divorced from such an environment.

What, then, is Bruner's (1990) approach to narrative itself? **He argues that human experience is inherently sequential and, to make sense of temporal sequence, individuals must assemble the elements of experience in some type of overall configuration which we might call a *plot***. Bruner has consistently dismissed the distinction between stories as "true" and stories as "fictional creations." Narrative, he holds, is ultimately indifferent to factual reality. Perhaps the crucial move Bruner advocates in describing narrative is the way it comes into existence or becomes fully energized by some "departure from the canonical" in human experience. By this he means that a story is set in motion

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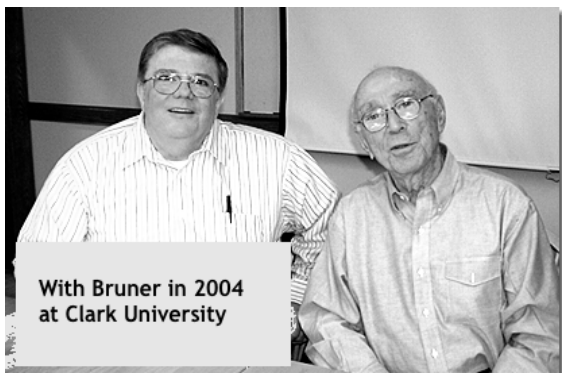
[2] Folk psychology is the term given to that large store of information including beliefs, rules, prejudices, and other interpretative guides by which people in a specific culture understand the behaviors of other persons. For example, in Arab culture, it is considered to be a gross insult to show the bottom of one's foot to another person and, thus, when protesters stamp on an American flag in a anti-US demonstration, they are employing one of the strongest means possible of expressing their antagonism. In American culture, the lack of acknowledgement of another's presence ("turning a cold shoulder") is one means by which to express social rejection of the other person.

when the usual situation in human life is somehow disrupted or rendered false. Bruner sometimes employs the notion of ***peripeteia*** from Aristotle's theory of drama. Recall that term means a kind of "reversal" in the fortunes of the central character of the play. At other times, Bruner cites the ***dramatistic theory of Kenneth Burke*** and his notion of dramatic **Pentad**. Burke's theory finds the motivation for a story in the upset of balance among the elements of the Pentad; "Trouble" enters the life world of the character(s) in a story and the ensuing narrative traces the attempts to restore some sort of equilibrium.

Other important aspects involve the objective or aims of good storytelling which is the achievement of what Bruner describes as ***verisimilitude*** or a kind of "lifelikeness." The way in which narrative reaches such a true-to-life portrayal very often rests upon the skillful use of **tropes** [figures of speech] such as ***metaphor*** (X is like Y), ***metonymy*** (the name stands for the whole reality), and ***synecdoche*** (part stands for the whole). In contrast, Bruner notes that **logical positivism or experimental science cannot generate explanations which are true-to-life because of their insistence upon context-less analysis**.

Narrative and the Law. Originally appointed to its School of Law in 1991, Bruner served from 1998 until his retirement in 2013 (at age 97!) as University Professor at New York University in the Greenwich Village section of New York City. During his appointment on the faculty of the Law School, he and his colleague, Tony Amsterdam, have brought their expertise to a narrative understanding of legal procedures and court contests. In his current setting, Bruner has extended his analysis to an increasingly explicit embrace of narrative as constitutive of an individual's self: "...it is through narrative that we create and re-create selfhood, that self is a product of our telling and not some essence to be delved for in the recesses of subjectivity. There is now evidence that if we lacked the capacity to make stories about ourselves, there would be no such thing as selfhood" (Bruner, 2002, pp. 85-86).


With Bruner in 2004 at Clark University


Paris, 2012 with Mark Freeman

As I have read through several reviews of his work, I am more and more struck by the notion one critic offered that he is, above all, an intellectual first and a psychologist second (see Judge, 1984). Rather than exhibiting an identity as a kind of "true believer" in the discipline of psychology, Bruner's allegiance has always been to the larger nexus of ideas by which we might understand the world with greater satisfaction. He has constantly eschewed rigid disciplinary boundaries in his reading and his writings and can fairly be said to have maintained friendship with a reasonable number of the most influential thinkers of the second half of the 20th century.

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