

### ***Book Review***

Bradbury, J. 2020. *Narrative Psychology and Vygotsky in Dialogue: Changing Subjects*. London: Routledge.

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In a special edition of the journal 'Alternations' (2019) on the extended programmes in universities in South Africa, authors highlighted the paucity of theoretical underpinnings in published articles on teaching approaches (these programmes are aimed at supporting non-traditional students' ability to bridge between school and university). One of the concerns was that although there was much reference to Vygotsky's work his developmental theories were largely underdeveloped. Jill Bradbury's book *Narrative Psychology and Vygotsky in Dialogue*, though not primarily focused on new students' learning, may offer readers greater insight into the use of Vygotsky's principles in student learning.

Jill Bradbury is a Professor of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. Her teaching and research focus is on narrative psychology with a particular focus on sociohistorical theories of personhood development, educational transformation and social change, and the role narrative may play in these. She is the principle investigator in the 'Narrative Enquiry for Social Transformation' (NEST) project.

In her book, Bradbury takes aim at the fractured nature of South African society. She makes a compelling case for a new Psychology that can break with the old and help to bridge these societal divides. In order to do this, she proposes bringing together Narrative Psychology and Vygotsky's theories of cognition in innovative ways, in the classroom and in society more generally.

This reviewer has only limited exposure to the field of Narrative Psychology and found these sections quite challenging, but nevertheless interesting and illuminating in terms of how actors in society represent themselves and are represented by others. The author draws often on Ricoeur in discussing the nature of what narratives actors express about themselves. Narratives, both those we tell about ourselves and those that others tell about us, help to constitute our identities. Though narratives reflect our lived experiences, as a sort of discursive component thereof, they are also intertwined with our histories and the past and present nature of society we live in. Narratives are constructions of those who develop them, often highlighting that which is critical to people, often enabling them to assert their own volition within these events. Narratives are also future looking, towards what could be in the imagination. As Bradbury states:

Narrative Psychology emphasises the temporal quality of human life ... through perpetual oscillations back and forth in time in which each fleeting, temporal moment is infused with



memories of the past and tenuously connected by intention and imagination to projected futures. (Bradbury, 2020: 4)

Furthermore, narratives reflect the often obligatory roles and types of participation actors have taken on in society, what creates a sense of belonging and care, and their affiliation to these entities. But these are not static categories, even though actors may want to highlight their importance. Subjects in society are not just swept along by these categories but may also resist and change them through their own intentional agency and volition towards what can be possible:

The connection of belonging can be experienced with great intensity of feeling, as in patriotism, class consciousness, or prejudice, but it can also be forgotten, neglected, dissimulated, even vehemently denied by those whom the rest of society considers as outcasts or traitors or by those who consider themselves dissidents, exiles, or outlaws. (Ricoeur, 1984: 198)

For Bradbury, this view on narrative has obvious connections with Vygotskian approaches to cognition and subject formation. For Vygotsky, we are first of all sociocultural beings, and we use the tools associated with our histories, culture and society to navigate our way through the world. Of central importance here is the use of language which carries this culture, firstly inter-mentally between people in the social world and secondly as internal dialogue. Language allows us to abstract from reality through decontextualizing events. Through internal dialogue, language distances us from, and so allows us to transform, experience and to plan and imagine new futures. In Bradbury's words language allows us to 'slip our moorings' (Bradbury, 1984: 10).

Bradbury pays particular attention to Vygotsky's ZPD in development. This is often understood as the more knowledgeable other inducting or scaffolding, the less initiated into the more desirable, often societally dominant forms of thinking. But what is often overlooked is the two-way process of such induction in the zone. The target audience can and often does reconstruct the desired outcome in ways which are not always predictable. People, particularly those who see themselves as traditionally excluded, can exert their agency and volition and this can be a powerful tool for learning and development. On the ZPD:

The challenge is thus to create moments for conversation between people that disrupt the powerful and affirm those less powerful that broaden the spectrum of knowing in ways that are both destabilising and generative. (Bradbury, 2020: 99)

In section 3 of the book Bradbury provides exemplars of her work with narratives and in particular the ZPD in teaching and learning. Of particular interest to this reviewer was Bradbury's account of an innovative alternative access programme for non-traditional students at the then University of Natal in the late 1980's/early 1990's which hinged on the ZPD. It was called the test-teach-test or TTT programme and was a 2 - 3 week intervention in the Humanities conducted

prior to the start of term. Students were first assessed on their current learning abilities. The best teachers and tutors in the field then worked with the students to stimulate and provoke new learning towards the kinds of knowing that would be important in later university life. The central concept was to promote learning beyond what was already known by students and so to transform students' learning abilities, rather than seeing these as fixed entities. Students were then assessed on their transformation or development during this period. This assessment was not a final mark of achievement but rather a measure of the extent of development from the first test, or a measure of learning potential. Bradbury compares the TTT to other alternative admissions initiatives at that time such as SATS-like once-off measures of current ability in Mathematics and Language. Such tests were in her view much poorer measures of students' potential, more psychometric, even though such tests are still in current use in South Africa.

Bradbury moves quite briskly on from here to formulate a version of the ZPD that is less asymmetric (at least in terms of power) and incorporates the narratives people tell of one another. The germ cell here is to disrupt fixed identities and ways of seeing across areas of substantial difference (such as race, class, age, histories, and culture) and recreate new, potentially more advanced concepts within the zone for all parties involved. For Bradbury, coming from her strongly humanist background, this is also a means to address the much needed and necessary calls for decolonisation in a transformatory and ultimately positive way. Thus this sort of ZPD is not about one providing 'scaffolding' for the other, or about extending prior learnings. As she points out, prior learnings can be blocks to rather than enablers of future learning and development. As she describes in the last pages of her book:

Navigating the demands of the present transformational moment to create more equitable futures is a process steered by those with whom we converse, by the narrative histories, both silenced and voiced, which we are willing to hear, sometimes in fraught translation, and through which we must weave new versions of ourselves and the world. (Bradbury, 2020: 170)

It is through these sorts of transformatory moments that Bradbury so positively and importantly proposes we can create an improved university environment and ultimately 'weave' new and better versions of ourselves and society.

*Reviewed by*

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## References

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