The Importance of Being Young

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It is a rare opportunity that one gets to write a preface to the set of accomplished scholarly works of one's students who are still at the very beginning of their academic pursuits. Yet they not only do interesting work—they also publish it.

The young authors in this Special Issue—my students at Clark University in recent years—are special in a number of ways.

First of all—the authors in this Special Issue are glorious underdogs. They have studied in a good quality U.S. private university that has the not so humble credo of "challenging conventions" and "changing the world"—without the posh elitist attitude of the "Ivy League" schools that is the usual reference to universities in the United States. And the contributors to this Issue indeed fulfill that expectation—they challenge conventions of how psychological research should be carried out, they expand ideas beyond those of their advisor—and thus are changing the world, little by little. However, in the administrative vernacular they are labeled *undergraduates*—a technical label that sets up their layer of existence (between *graduates* and "the others"— the unspecified nobody?) that prescribes a certain way of being to them: going to "classes" to listen to more or less interesting tales about science, taking exams, being taught by undoubtedly famous professors or self-asserting young instructors, enjoying the nightlife bypassing the restrictions[1], and so on. The possibility that young people in such social roles could accomplish something valuable seems to be left out of the administrative management of their intellectual quests in the course of university studies.

As a former undergraduate myself—some years back and in a very different social context—I have been supportive of the challenges to the conventions, starting from suggesting to them that they not go to "classes" but do research instead. How else could I? After my own first two years in classes the remaining three years never saw me in a lecture hall as a listener to the professors—some of whom were eager to fail me on the grounds of (what they considered to be) my arrogance. Yet it paid off for me—my full dedication to research led me, already in undergraduate years to accomplishments that later were a fruitful basis for becoming a traveler in the World, if nothing more.

I have, at times, tried to motivate my undergraduate students to become involved in research by a paradoxical and slightly insulting statement "*You can do excellent work in your research because nobody takes you seriously*." They laugh—yet what I say is true, but it

[1] Such as the "minimal drinking age" in the United States that is currently set at 21 years, leading to a thriving industry of production of counterfeit identity cards to be able to enter bars and enjoy the pleasures of being young.

is not an insult. Or if it is—it is meant as such to the administrative systems which actively "help" the young students to obediently do everything they are supposed to do in college—take classes, be advised what classes they are required to take, and so on. The possibility that young souls can be left to their own creativity and that such creativity—thoughtfully oriented in the background but left to its own devices to create something new—could be trusted, is ruled out. I often bring to my students the example of the (later) well-known Russian neuropsychologist Alexander Luria (born in 1903) who in year 1924 was appointed to the role of Scientific Secretary of the Institute of Psychology in Moscow. In those times—and in the social turmoil of post-revolutionary Russia—twenty-one year olds were trusted to accomplish more serious tasks than just gaining entrance to neighborhood bars to celebrate their "emerging adulthood" as they graduate into the drinking age.

Secondly, the young contributors to this Special Issue demonstrate remarkable intellectual autonomy. My role as their "advisor" in their research has been remote—and I am both proud and happy about this. While undoubtedly basing their work on the cultural psychology of semiotic mediation that originates in my intellectual world, they have each found their unique, new, and intellectually interesting empirical phenomena of their interest, and created their own and personally important research projects from the very start. They have successfully bypassed the normative prescriptions of how "science of psychology" is to be done, and have struggled in their development of new methodologies. This is what I call *constructive arrogance*—a necessary starting point for any scientific enterprise. To get a glimpse of how such challenge to conventions has worked one can read the interviews with Nobel Prize laureates[2].

Finally, I want to outline what I see as specific innovations that the contributions to this Special Issue bring to the readers. All the contributions pertain to basic human life processes—loss of a close person and maintaining the living memories, social observation of others as the basis for creating new relations—and new illusions (rumors), and the flexibility of the human meaning-making system. The authors here do not address trivial questions—a testimony to the restless eagerness of the young scholars who have not yet been "trained" to honor the trivialities that dominate "the literature" in many areas of psychology.

More specifically—Steven Wall (2013) focuses on the processes of preserving the memories of the close persons through commemorative objects. His demonstration of the flexibility of the material expressions of the others—deceased relatives-- is important far beyond the area of looking at the relationships with the dead. It speaks of the general flexibility of bringing previously meaningless objects into a developing or self-maintaining relationship and—through the affective fields of feeling the Other as if Oneself—maintain the synthetic link of the real and the imaginary. All versions of signs—icons (photographs of loved ones), indices (a lock of the beloved woman in a medallion worn by a proud knight on a mission) or symbols (romances in letters or novels)—can be used in such *bricolage* of signifying the unique affective relations. A rose that happens to be presented as a gift, or an

[2] http://www.nobelprize.org

apple, can enter into such functions. In everyday life the mothers' taking care of the schoolchildren as to sending them off to school in clean clothes, or women feeding their nightly visitors (Clark, 1989) can be an act of communicating a particular meaning. Wall's work is a nice demonstration of the notion of overdetermination of human lives by meaning (Obeyesekere, 1990).

Greg Minikes (2013, Figures 2 and 3) introduces the notion of *semiotic switch*—which I interpret as a creative extension of the general notion of meaning complex as it operates in a concrete bifurcation point of making sense of an unfolding social event. The construction of the experimental setting in his study was complex—and vulnerable to different interpretations by the subject—yet the notion of semiotic switch remains as an invariant. For me it provides a nice basis to link the network approaches to semiotic mediators with concrete action demand contexts.

Kevin Carriere's two papers (Carriere, 2013a, 2013b) show a rapid move of a young researcher from the confines of the "literature" in the field of social psychology to the wide world of semiotic cultural psychology where old psychological issues acquire new intellectual horizons. When he designed and carried out the traditional laboratory "I-sharing" study, based on the models learned from "the literature", I was skeptical about the potential outcomes of the study, as well as of its wider theoretical relevance. When the results were obtained, and written up (Carriere, 2013a) I was glad I could find my original expectation to be completely wrong. Not only were the empirical results astounding—that people, under artificial laboratory conditions, would take the different or similar evaluation of basically nonsensical objects *interpersonally* so seriously—but also the theoretical implications of that finding (see Carriere, 2013a) as the author points these out, are of deep human relevance. Of course—I need to add—this importance was demonstrable once the original—quantitative—focus of the experiment was transformed into a closer look at the qualitative side of the phenomena. Psychology as science is necessarily qualitative in its methodology—both historically (Valsiner, 2012) and, prospectively, in its future (Rudolph, 2013). The social imperative of quantification that has dominated since 1830s is a result of political rather than scientific course of history of the social sciences (Porter, 1995).

In a similar vein, the construction of the meaning of home (Carriere, 2013b) we are dealing with relevant theoretical issues, beyond the obvious universality of the phenomenon—we all, each of us, some of the time, create the feeling of *being at home* under very different environmental conditions. Carriere (2013b, Figure 2) elaborates our (Valsiner and Cabell, 2012) figure of predicate binding to the stem notion I→AM into a relation with the notion I→ FEEL antedating the dialogical—yet basically cognitive --self-maintenance process. From here there are multiple future possibilities for empirical investigations—into the making of souvenirs (and—into meaningful commemorative objects—Wall, 2013). Theoretically this direction opens the door for the study of how a person strives towards the boundaries of one's current *Umwelt*. This introduces the developmental focus into the study of person in social context.

A general feature of all the papers in this Special Issue is their adherence to the methodological canons of idiographic science (Molenaar, 2007; Salvatore and Valsiner, 2010). Psychology needs to give up the use of samples (pretending to generalize to populations) in favor of creating generic models based on individual cases, and testing these models on other individual cases. The papers included in this Special Issue illustrate how such methodological revolution could start. True—they do not accomplish it at the methodological level, but merely demonstrate in humble ways how generalization of findings from single qualitative cases is possible.

In sum—the reader of this Special Issue is up to a glimpse of the work of a new generation of cultural psychologists. They are invited to challenge the conventions of traditional research in psychology. Already looking at the cultural side of the human experiences is a good starting point.

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