

EXPLORING ARTISTIC NARRATIVE FORMS TO EXPAND THE STUDY OF THE DIALOGICAL SELF

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Abstract. The basic notion of *narrative* is based on verbal discourse the study of which has prevailed in psychological research. Monuments, music, drawing, and painting have also been recognized as narratives. Lanaridis (2017) discusses music as narrative, reaching beyond traditional boundaries of psychology within which human experience is considered, and exploring new possibilities for the empirical research on the Self. While Lanaridis focuses on the reasons, level, and extent of the narrative capacity of music in the context of a contemporary society within the framework of Social Representation, Social Identity and Dialogical Self Theory, we discuss the particular issue of using non-verbal expressive artifacts to deal empirically with psychological phenomena.

Keywords: narratives, intersubjectivity, non-verbal expressive artifacts, Self

In this paper, we aimed at discussing some of Lanaridis's ideas, especially considering his notions of music as a narrative tool for promoting and connecting memories and feelings and, doing so, for the development of auto-reflection behaviors and collective memory descriptions. To achieve this objective, we initially highlight the notion of intersubjectivity brought from Silva Filho (2015), and then we rescued the characteristics of the narrative as it is conceived by Bruner (2001). Afterward, we identify some challenges in conceiving music – an artistic artifact - as a powerful methodologic instrument for dealing with the analyses of the affective field in human lives.

The challenge of dealing with the intersubjective triangulation

Two centuries ago, the poet Longfellow said that music is the universal language of mankind. Despite the hopeful promises these words convey—one of which may be the suggestion that music is a metalanguage that could eventually overcome the often tense communication between individuals and societies—the way people relate to music requires a nuanced understanding. Lanaridis (2017) discusses the nature of the

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experience connected to music and demonstrates how memories and the feelings related to music are culturally constructed and situated. He takes into consideration various theoretical approaches that focus on the individual-society relationship. These theories converge in the emphasis on the psychological organization of what is internal and external.

Assuming that music functions as a narrative stream, Lanaridis (2017) develops his analysis toward a threefold goal: (1) to examine the narrative qualities of music within the communicational process, (2) to examine the ongoing subconscious relationships between the individual and the society, within the external and internal societies with which the self interacts, and (3) to consider the factors that may be responsible for the ways individuals internalize music in contemporary culture.

With respect to the first point, Lanaridis (2017) underscores the importance of music in human lives, namely, its role along the socialization process, in activating emotional responses and self-reflection. Thus, the flow of the narrative is to be approached as a communicative process, so that we can focus on the emotional resonance present in what the music communicates to the individual. The music, in this context, is understood as a significant artifact opening channels that stimulate an emotional response. However, while it is possible to understand the characterization of music as an expressive artifact, its narrative qualities are explained only at the end of the chapter, where the author says that music not only works as a trigger of emotions but also as an artifact that introduces the ability to bind descriptive and collective memories of events from an emotional representation.

Regarding the relationship between the individual and society, Lanaridis (2017) emphasizes its dialectic nature and evokes social representation theory (SRT), social identity theory (SIT) and dialogical self theories (DST) to better approach it. Social representations are presented as a prior and well-established belief system that sustains, for each individual, the construction of private meanings. From SIT, the author highlights the importance of peers in the construction of identity, as well as the way diverse situations evoke different responses in the subject. DST is relevant in two dimensions: (1) the emphasis put on understanding the processes by which the voices the individual interacts with his or her social environment are, from the earliest stages of life, embedded in his or her subconscious, and (2) the emotional and relational dynamics between the different positions of Self. The author also assumes that the narrative qualities of music begin in a subconscious sphere and through the early relationship between the mother and the baby, persist and develop through all subsequent periods of human development, and always involves relationships with significant Others.

However, the ways through which Lanaridis (2017) conceives and differentiates the inner world, taken as subconscious, and the outside world, are not made explicit in

EXPLORING ARTISTIC NARRATIVE FORMS

his article. His next challenge is to further develop his ideas, going deeper in discussing the methodological and conceptual consequences of an effective consideration of intersubjectivity. Silva Filho (2015), building upon the ideas of Bruner (1996), states that intersubjectivity can be conceived as a human condition that allows us to access, interpret, and know the minds of Others, and makes it possible to create and negotiate common signs using language. Intersubjectivity is presented, thus, as a phenomenon that can be found in the mutual sharing of statements and beliefs about the world, being formed from three primary elements: a dynamic Self, practical language and the mind of a third party with which the Self is related. The narratives, in these contexts, appear as a vessel through which emerge the possibilities of constructing the Self and the relationships of the person with Others as well as his or her relations in the world. It is worth noting, however, that the narrative is presented as a speech constructed within interactional contexts in a real (or imagined) time; Silva Filho (2015) refers to Davidson, who considers that the mental state can neither be understood as an entirely private or internal state, nor one completely external to the individual. Actually, what provides to each subject the concept of a given object is the line formed by the interaction, mediated by language, which is established between them. Therefore, the sharing of meaning makes sense only if the subjects involved are able to think things about the object in a public and intersubjective space. In other words, it is assumed that the individualization of beliefs and thoughts only makes sense if they are analyzed under the light of systematic causal interrelations and interconnections between (1) the individual, (2) the interlocutor, and (3) the object located in the world. So, it is no longer necessary to resort to such separation between the subconscious (intern) and extern spheres of psychic reality, but, instead, to conceive it bases on an intersubjective triangulation.

Music, as an “expressive artifact,” is a very special kind of object located in the world. As Lanaridis (2017) suggests when reviewing the literature on the subject, music brings to the infant, from the very early stages of human development, “a wide range of ethnic and cultural experiences beyond the sphere of the mother”; these experiences inform the person’s autobiographical and emotional memories. As an emotionally charged cultural artifact, music becomes a powerful line, as he observes, along which “an individual negotiates and renegotiates their personality and musical identity as a result of their sociocultural positioning and repositioning.” The author makes a point, no doubt, in bringing together relevant theoretical frameworks within which to design empirical research on these issues. This is a necessary and important beginning.

The Use of Expressive Cultural Artifacts in Psychological Research

Expressive cultural artifacts that escape the conventional and hegemonic reign of word-based, verbal narratives, have yet to be significantly explored in psychological research.

Since the recognition that human conduct is storied (Sarbin, 1986) and that human beings use narrative to represent, share and remember their experience (Gergen & Gergen, 1997), the conception of narrative as based on verbal discourse has prevailed in psychological research. Although monuments, music, drawing, and painting have also been recognized as narratives, this recognition does not correspond to a proportional development of studies analyzing such non-verbal dimensions. Of course, this is not the rule for fields such as literary history, where it is acknowledged that it's impossible to count all the forms of narratives we have in the world (Barthes & Duisit, 1975)

Actually, important parts of human personal and collective experience can only be narrated in non-verbal or non-linear poetic forms. The Brazilian artist Francisco Brennand—known as the “Master of Dreams”—created a huge work that is metaphorically said to be an epic romance—although the author is a sculptor and painter and not a writer. His impressive sculptures and the original architectural cluster that surrounds them, “blend to create a world of abyss, at the same time Dionysian, subterranean, obscure, sexual and religious” (Borba, 2015).¹ Brennand’s art pieces condense deep human feelings, personally expressed and inspired by human collective and timeless experience. Borba concludes: “his novels, his short stories, who knows, short poems, are these shining beaks of toucans, hawks, and vultures, the phallic shafts, the legs of absurd women, fish gasping painfully, files of friars, toads, turtles, buttocks with heads of lizards, crosses, heraldic motifs, blind totems with breasts, eggs hatching snakes, the table laid lavishly with a phantasmagoric banquet. But why describe it? No words can do justice to the art of Brennand. Literature is useless. He writes on ceramic” (Borba, 2015).²

Experience is beyond verbal symbols, which can be misleading and reductive. Artistic expression overcomes such limits and does justice to the richness of experience, and, in turn, feeds forward and enriches it (Valsiner, 2014). Regarding music—the art of sounds—Priolli (1994) points out that it is possible, through this vehicle, to express deeply a feeling or to describe a scene from nature. It is important, therefore, to highlight this dual functionality of music in order to understand its narrative qualities, in particular, the ability to express such feelings and descriptions via other means than the linear verbal language.

Lanaridis (2017), in discussing music as narrative, goes beyond psychology’s traditional boundaries within which human experience is considered. We could say that, in doing so, he works toward expanding the theoretical and methodological framework on narrative and in doing so, explores new possibilities of empirical research on the Self. Here, it is important to take into account how the narrative properties of music can

¹F. B. Borba at www.brennand.com.br, retrieved August 28, 2016.

² The emphasis (underlining) is ours.

EXPLORING ARTISTIC NARRATIVE FORMS

be conceived. Bruner is a relevant reference for discussing this issue, in the measure in which he identifies and defines such properties.

According to Bruner (1991), narratives are defined by qualities such as diachronicity, particularity, the binding of the intentional state, canonicity—and the rupture of the canonical—genus, rules, sensitivity to context and narrative competence. This stems from the realization that narratives constitute an approach to private events that break with the canonical screenplay and that occur over time. Thus, it is possible to assign an intentional state to the characters that make up the plot. Understanding narratives depends, therefore, on the ways in which they can be meant by the subject, and their acceptability does not rely on a correct reference to reality but meets the criterion of verisimilitude. No matter how much a narrative focuses on events that break with the canonical, it is built, in a given context, to make sense of the strangeness of the experiences, which are then grouped in a diachronic structure capable of giving continuity to the present and to notions of canonicity, as links are then forged between the “exceptional” and the “common.”

Vygotsky’s conception of art stresses precisely that it has the potential to link objective reality and social relations established in a particular time, but produces something that goes beyond that, and is new. Not only that: art has the ability to objectify feelings and other human potentialities, providing for a new psychic organization, and can mediate the individual experience and the human race, as a cultural product where complex mental activities are crystallized and can, therefore, be appropriated by other human beings beyond the limits of time and space. Therefore, art is “the objectification of human feelings, a technique drawn up by men that allows individuals to socialize certain feeling, but also, at the same time, make it personal, part of the psyche” (Barroso & Superti, 2014, p. 26). Or, as Vygotsky himself states (1999), art is a tool that “systematizes a field entirely specific to the psyche of the social man—precisely the field of feeling” (1999, p. 12). In this sense, artistic artifacts are presented as iconic signs that function as a basis for sharing social representations.

So, one can assume that music, as an artistic artifact, presents intercommunicational and narrative qualities which, while not conforming directly to those described by Bruner, fit most linear, verbal narratives, and do justice to the expression and recognition of the human affective field.

Exploring non-verbal expressive artifacts has been one of our concerns when dealing empirically with psychological phenomena. Narratives and semi-structured interviews are strategies that fit the basic assumptions of DST, which sees the Self as a semiotic system, as an instance polyphonic and dialogical, moving through tensions that regulate the uniqueness of the experience in the irreversible time (Tateo & Marsico, 2013). Going deeper, Valsiner (2007) rescues the importance of feelings in the subjective world, claiming that human affective processes, due to their complexity, go

beyond any linear efforts to describe and explain. He also considers a problem the inability of traditional psychological methods to study the dynamic and complex processes of human life. He defends the “development of scientific promoter signs that enable us to better study psychological realities” (pp. 56-57).

Valsiner reminds us that an important part of human experience occurs above and beyond the use of verbal language. It can be difficult to use language to notice something that is felt, but that is not immediately linguistically encoded; affective processes, for instance, exhibit a complexity that is hard to describe and explain linearly and can be, therefore, verbally inaccessible.

The use of narratives based on body maps, as proposed by Gastaldo, Magellan, Hangman & Davy (2012), appears, in this sense, as a possible methodological strategy, consistent with studies based on DST and on semiotic constructivism. Body maps are configured as artistic artifacts that can serve as semiotic tools to orient and amplify research participants’ talking, mediating relations present at the borders between them and the researcher. According to Gastado et al. (2012), body maps can be defined as body images in actual size, created by artistic techniques like drawing and painting, carrying the potential to represent aspects of the lives of people, their bodies and the world in which they live. It is a form of storytelling—in which the drawings of bodies work as totems that contain symbols with different meanings—that can only be understood in relation to the creator of the story, who lives the experience. As a creative method, the construction of body maps can provide, for participants, alternative means to communicate ideas, experiences, meanings, and feelings, reflexively and without drastically fragmenting their unity.

The availability of creative, theoretically relevant methodological strategies including music as an expressive artifact, is a very welcome promise and is, certainly, on the horizon of Lanaridis’ quite interesting discussion.

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EXPLORING ARTISTIC NARRATIVE FORMS

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