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NARRATIVE THERAPIES, PSYCHOLOGY AND THE NATURE OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Abstract

Narrative therapies assume themselves as an alternative movement to the traditional psychological models. Instead of insight, narrative appears as the main organizing concept of the therapeutic process. The main purpose of this kind of therapies is the deconstruction of taken for granted discourses that are perpetuating the problem. These therapies are known by their liberation efforts and even political positioning, representing an important innovation within this domain. However, they assume a hostile attitude against psychology that results in a lack of research of the therapeutic processes. In this article, we explore possible alternatives to this kind of rupture with psychology. In order to obtain a more specific picture of the actual situation, and borrowing from Valsiner, we present four different frames of reference of "doing psychology" (intra-individual, inter-individual, individual-ecological, and the individual socio-ecological). We consider that there are understandable reasons for a rejection of three of those frameworks. However, the individual social-ecological frame of reference seems to be a promising partner to a future dialogue between narrative therapies and research, since the cultural/semiotic dimensions are highlighted.

In this paper we analyze the position that narrative therapies (NT) have been assuming toward the psychological science. NT have been suggesting that the core metaphors that organize psychotherapy, like psychological apparatus (psychodynamic therapies), information processing (cognitive therapies), as well as many others, are generically misleading, and that a better metaphor to describe what happens in the therapeutic interaction is the deconstruction of old and the construction of new narratives of life (see Neimeyer Stewart, 2000). People are thus conceived as storytellers that sometimes get stuck in the process of constructing less „functional” self-narratives and the therapist is regarded as a kind of co-editor of alternative narratives. This metaphor has been changing the way of doing therapy in a diversity of models, from psychodynamic, to cognitive and family therapies (see Omer, Alon, 1997).

One core position of this model of therapy is the critique toward the main assumptions of psychological knowledge. This is clearer in the model that we use in this paper as a prototype of the diversity of NT: the re-authoring model of White and Epston (1990). The reason for choosing this model as

a prototype has to do with the impact that the re-authoring model has been having in the landscape of NT, being sometimes confused with the narrative therapy itself.

In this paper, we will specify some of the main critiques that NT made toward psychological knowledge, but for now it is enough to say that this critical position has, in our view, potentialities, but also dangers. The main danger results from an excessive deconstruction of clinical psychology that has the risk of making meaningless any empirical research in the psychotherapy field. From our perspective, some of the critiques of the psychological theories and research are fair, but the inability to find an alternative paradigm of research has the risk of freezing these models and making theoretical innovation very difficult, if not impossible.

Consistent with the critique that NT address to psychology, McLoed (2004), recently suggested that these therapies are post-psychological. Thus, one distinctive feature of NT is the refusal of „insight” as an organizing metaphor. Change is no longer the result of the discovery of the internal pathogenic mechanisms, by the therapy and the client, and the subsequent effort to change them. In a sense, NT emphasize an „outsight”, which means, the development of a critical look toward the way the relationship between the individual and his or her culture produces dysfunctional outcomes. As McLeod (2004) suggested, therapy transforms itself from a psychological to a social process.

Again, White and Epston’s (1990) model is the one that is clearer regarding the emergence of culture in the therapeutic encounter (see Madigan, 1998). This concern with culture results from its foucaudian inspiration, according to whom our culture is dominated by processes of individualization and normalization, which produces an obsession with people’s interiority. As it is suggested by Foucault (1986), after the Seventeen Century, interiority became the central locus of political power (external and after that internalized), or in his own words: „the soul is (now) the prison of the body” (p. 32)¹. One can see this movement in a huge diversity of places: in schools, in prisons, in the asylums for the insane and so on. The common obsession is now how to organize people in these spaces in a productive and disciplined way. According to Foucault (1986), this movement is not circumscribed to these institutions themselves but it is now an obsession of our entire culture, in which the main power is a normative one (in contrast with the power based on the rules).

NT try to deconstruct precisely this normalizing surveillance that saturates this model with political activism, which, as Monk and Gehart (2003) suggest, tries to expose „the taken-for-granted «truths» that dictate how to live and how to behave ... (and) liberate people from society marginalizing practices that determine what is acceptable and unacceptable” (p. 20).

These changes in the very nature of therapy led McLoed (2004) to suggest that NT are post-psychological therapies, since we have no resource to any *psy*

¹ The translation from the Portuguese edition has been prepared by the authors.

language to explain what happens in therapeutic interaction. The contributions for the understanding of this process come from sociology, literature or anthropology. White and Epston (1990), for instance, suggested two central metaphors that allow us to understand change: the behavioral text and the rite of passage. In the first metaphor, problems are understood as „performance of oppressive” (p. 6) stories and change is conceived as a re-authoring of alternative stories. Therefore, as suggested by Omer and Alon (1997), therapy involves quasi-literary skills that allows the therapist to construct with the client new meaningful stories. The second one, using an anthropological concept (Van Genep, 1960; quoted in White, Epston, 1990), suggests that the process of change is similar to the changes that take place in rituals of passage. Thus, it involves, a separation phase, in which the person separates him or herself from a traditional role and enters in a world with new rules largely unknown; a liminal phase characterized by some confusion and also some explorations of new ways of acting; and finally, a reincorporation phase that completes the changing process, allowing the person to arrive at a new social order.

Whatever the favourite metaphor, it is clear that there is an absence of using a psychological vocabulary in the ways White and collaborators (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 1994) conceive the nature of change.

The use of the prefix „post” means that we are precisely in historical situation of ambiguity – despite the psychological heritage of psychotherapy, NT try to move itself from the traditional way of acting (e. g., political activism), modifying the assumptions that guide the practice of psychotherapy (e. g., absence of psychological explanations).

In this paper, we aimed at clarifying a vital point for the development of NT: what kind of empirical research, if any, would contribute for an enrichment of these models? We also hoped that in discussing the previous question we would be able to clarify how a different way of doing psychology could be compatible with the main critiques of NT.

Thus, this paper tries to address a main challenge that NT need to overcome: maintaining their critical status to traditional psychology, showing at the same time efforts to develop an alternative model of theory construction and empirical research.

1. „POST-PSYCHOLOGY” OR ANOTHER WAY OF DOING PSYCHOLOGY?

As we suggested above, the critique and the self-marginalization of NT toward psychology, if liberating in a first moment, brings new and difficult problems in a second moment.

We will first briefly discuss what we see as the main liberating features of NT, to focus later in the paper on their major difficulties.

NT deconstruct mental illness as an exclusively internal problem, which accentuates the person’s deficits. This opened new ways to work with people avoiding the problems posed by the pathologizing of life difficulties. Congruently, the therapist is not seen as an expert in mental illness or an expert in the „art of living”, but as an interlocutor that facilitates the dissolution of problematic narratives. Finally, the use of socio-linguistic or semiotic tools is very interesting be-

cause instead of inviting the person to look inside him or herself, stimulates the person to question the way his or her relationship matrix is supporting change, or on the contrary, the problematic self-narrative.

Despite these interesting innovations in the therapeutic landscape, NT have created new problems.

On the conceptual side, one can argue that their work of deconstruction demonstrate how mainstream psychology is clearly grounded on a certain type of social-cultural constitution of the person. The rejection of „introspection” (meaning the perspective that assumes that knowledge comes from a direct and non-mediated access to our internal states), created a hostility against mainstream psychology. However, the need of taking into account the kind of semiosphere (Valsiner, in press) that we inhabit does not necessarily mean that there is no viability for psychology.

Thus, first of all, we may need to make it clear what kind of psychology are NT rejecting. In our view, the deconstruction of that isolated or solipsistic image of the person does not necessarily lead us to the conclusion that „subjectivity” is dead. What we may need is another way of making psychology. The human mind or psyche may need a new understanding, locating the person as a cultural agent and player – in Valsiner’s (1998) words, the person may be better conceived of as a personal culture, someone who becomes an agent in the process of relating with others using cultural semiotic tools.

That hostility against introspection also leads to a kind of neglecting attitude towards research, since most of the efforts at this level are traditionally based on the individualistic and *egological* orientation that NT reject. Moreover, since NT are grounded in a deconstructive positioning, it is probably more familiar to canalize research toward the deconstruction of pretence „self-evident truths” than to produce empirical research that may lead to new theoretical developments. The final result is an apparent disinvestment or even hostility against empirical studies.

Thus, if traditional psychology has been reducing knowledge to „data”, the risk is to substitute this for the „reduction to dogma” (see Valsiner, 2000, p. 65, for a critique of these two forms of reduction).

Without strong empirical research NT are at risk of being marginalized, therefore losing their transformative potential in the psychotherapy field and in the culture itself (see Guilfoyle, 2005, for a discussion of NT potential of transformation of psychotherapy and culture).

From our perspective, the main question is how NT can find a way of constructing empirical research that is congruent with its main critiques of traditional psychology and psychotherapy. We will analyze this issue by discussing which kind of empirical research should be considered unacceptable from a NT perspective. A related question is what should be the core characteristics of an empirical research that could allow a meaningful development of the body of theory constructed so far in the NT field. However, before turning to these two topics (what forms of research should be rejected and accepted by NT) we need to focus on the diversity of ways of constructing the psychological knowledge.

2. FOUR WAYS OF DOING PSYCHOLOGY

Valsiner (1989, 2000, in press) suggested that there are four fundamental approaches to the empirical research in psychology (or one could say that we have four different psychologies). According to him (Valsiner, 2000), these are „general conceptual positioning in the mind of researchers” (p. 67), which allow them to formulate questions and organize research methods in a way that a coherency is create between the different phases of the methodology cycle (assumption, theories, phenomenon, data and method). We will describe how Valsiner (1989, 2000) characterized these frames of reference, in order to reflect on how psychotherapy research has been organizing itself within each frame.

2.1. INTRAINDIVIDUAL OR INTRASYSTEMIC REFERENCE FRAME

This is the most familiar frame of reference in psychology. This frame when applied to the study of individuals² results in separating from the contexts and emphasizing the description and explaining their states and internal processes (e. g., traits, unconscious process, cognitive processing). According to Valsiner (1989, 2000) this frame tends to use tautological explanations (one is aggressive because one has an aggressive trait, and one has an aggressive trait because his or her behavior is aggressive). This kind of explanation corresponds to an Aristotelian tendency to identify the entities that are supposedly present in the „psychical world” and turn these into static vocabularies of ontological description. Clearly, they are not explanations of anything at all, given their tautological nature, but are merely pseudo-explanations (Valsiner, 1998, 2000; Smedslund, 1995).

2.2. INTERINDIVIDUAL OR INTERSYSTEMIC REFERENCE FRAME

This is the most common frame used in the empirical research. It centers itself around a differential approach, which searches for the differences between individuals for purposes of comparison. Thus, different individuals or different groups are compared and their ascribed characteristics are assumed as real qualities. The focus is no longer the internal dynamics of these features, but the comparison between subjects based on these characteristics.

When applied to the study of individuals, this approach shows an obsession for the individual differences and takes for granted that these differences are quantitative and not qualitative (e. g., all the individuals would have the same traits with different intensities). Lamiel (1998) referred to this form of psychology as a „much less a *psychology* than a *demography* exploiting a psychological vocabulary” (p. 34), since the knowledge is more about aggregate tendencies (e. g., „women have more verbal aptitudes than men”), than theories able to explain the behavior of a single individual.

² Despite the discussion of the application of these frames of reference to the study of individuals, this frame is applied to the study of social groups or cultural groups, implying a reification of the supposed social or cultural characteristics. Therefore, one can assert that the Portuguese family is „traditional”, that their values are X or Z, which represents in this particular example an abstraction and a reduction of the diversity of family organization that are present in a given culture.

Sometimes, as Valsiner (2000) suggested, there is a curious combination of the two previous frames of reference in psychology: knowledge is produced in an interindividual frame, but it is used in an intraindividual one, being forgotten in this process that knowledge constructed about aggregates can not directly be applied to specific individuals.

One of the central features of the interindividual frame is the normalizing tendency that results from the process of comparison. Thus one can have a medium intelligence, a low or a high one, but everybody is situated somewhere in the Gauss curve. In terms of research, the medium becomes the norm and the aggregation a strategy to eliminate the „measurement error“. As Valsiner (in press) shows, this norm is nothing more than the euro-american norm, emerging in this process a de-culturation of psychology.

Moreover, this approach allows the comparison of characteristics conceived as intra-psychical, even when there are a considerable amount of ambiguity about the status of the „variable“ in study (Danziger, 1997). Intelligence is a classic example since it started to be assessed even without any clear theoretical definition or understanding of the dynamic processes involved in it.

2.3. THE INDIVIDUAL-ECOLOGICAL REFERENCE FRAME

The third frame of reference suggests that the understanding of the psychological phenomena should be understood through the study of the action of a system (individual, group) over its environment and the way the system transform itself during the interaction:

„It allows a glimpse into the goal-oriented actions of the person – *who acts upon the environment with some future-oriented purpose* (for example, solving a problem). The action results in feedback from the changed environment upon the person. The feedback participates in the change of the person into a new state.“ (Valsiner, 2000, p. 71; italic added).

Thus, behavior is not explained by linear sequences of efficient causality, but one must take into account the comprehension of the (anticipatory) meaning that is ascribed by the agents. This position allows reintroducing the concept of agency, which is at jeopardy in the effort of explanation that uses efficient linear sequences (e. g., A causes B, X is a predictor of Z). As Danziger (1997) suggested, with the emergence of a psychological vocabulary in the 18th century³, the moral discourse is substituted by a scientific discourse in which the objects of the mind started to be conceived as analogous to the objects of the physical world. This historical development had two main consequences: the description of the

³ Danziger (1997) alerts us to the fact that a psychological vocabulary is rather recent. From his point of view it is not correct to say, for instance, that the ancient Greeks had a psychological vocabulary, although they had a vocabulary that was centered on the care of oneself. Therefore, for the ancient Greeks the attention to oneself, the Socratic „know thyself“, was not the result of an obsession with the individuality as a distinct feature of the person, but an effort in participating in the collective order. The same happens in the traditional societies, in which the surveillance of oneself is based on the compliance (or on the rejection) of traditional values. As Baumeister (1997) suggests, only when people started making significant choices in terms of life projects (e. g., marriage, profession) and simultaneously are asked to cease a blind compliance to the traditional codes (e. g., church) and to decide by themselves, that the self became a significant concept.

mind became mechanistic (the mind has to be conceived in the same way as Newton understood the Universe) and the privileged form of causality became efficient and linear.

Efficient causality is the main form of causality used in the previous two frames, but is useless in a systemic frame, given the open nature (i. e. in interaction with the environment) of the open systems (cf. Maturana, Varela, 1987; Morin, 2001; Valsiner, 2000). In this frame, the anticipatory ability of human beings makes other forms of causality more significant. Therefore, humans are more organized by the anticipation of the future (final causality), than by efficient past chains of events. As Bateson (1972/2000) said, it is ironic that due to people's ability to predict the future they become so unpredictable to an external observer (contrary to what the previous approaches suggested).

Valsiner (2000) suggested that the large majority of the studies done in the field of developmental psychology were situated in this ecological frame. Therefore, for instance, the work done by Piaget emphasized how children construct their development in interaction with the environment. The main goal of this frame is not the comparison of a subject with another regarding their performance, but the understanding of how a specific subject transforms him or herself by transforming the environment.

The most problematic feature of this frame is the consideration of the human being as a solitary one facing a de-culturalized world. Since, humans necessarily live in culturally organized environments, one needs a frame that takes into account that people live in the „semiosphere – a sphere of semiotic signs” (Valsiner, in press, p. 56).

2.4. THE INDIVIDUAL-SOCIOECOLOGICAL REFERENCE FRAME

The main difference between this frame and the previous one is that here one considers the role of social regulation in the relationship between the system and the environment: „the researcher needs to analyse the structure of social suggestions that exists in the particular episode of encounter between the person and the environment.” (Valsiner, 2000, p. 72).

Human behavior is always co-constructed by the person and the cultural suggestions that organized the meaning that is ascribed to a given response. The suggestions of this „other” (i. e., real person, institution) can be the result of reactions of real others or be „encoded in the environment itself” (Valsiner, 2000, p. 72). Anyway, in the study of development (or the therapeutic change) one always needs to take into account three elements: (1) the person, as an active agent, (2) the environment and (3) the „social others” that guide the person toward some objectives.

„Social others” refers not only to actual people, but to all structure of social suggestions (e. g., social roles, institutional rules) that in some way or another give a context, and therefore a meaning, to any individual action. Symbolic others can be made present by the codification in the physical environment (e. g., photo of a person) or by the imaginative elicitation (e. g., when we imaginatively speak with someone that is physically absent).

These three vectors constitute what Valsiner (2000) called the „field of canalization of development” (p. 73) and they have reciprocal and highly dynamic interaction. The person is framed in his or her cultural and social background and his or her action is only understood taking into account this context.

Thus, even when we are alone we are always with „others”. For instance, if one is „relaxing by watching TV” at the end of a workday, in a sense this implies the referred structure of social suggestions, which canalizes and gives meaning to this particular action.

This approach has theoretical roots as diverse as George Herbert Mead (1934/1988), Vygotsky (1978), or Bakhtin (1929/1984), since one accepts the impossibility of dissociating the person from his or her social context. To forget one of the terms (person or social environment) is to destroy the imminent symbolic, cultural and social nature of our lives. Thus, the person only becomes a future-oriented agent by her or his insertion in a relational game with others (actual or symbolic ones). This way, there is a clearly dialogical suggestion (Bakhtin, 1929/1984; Salgado, Goncalves, in press) in this reference frame, given that the presence of others is the background where the single individual moves.

3. A LOOK UPON THE NARRATIVE APPROACH FROM VALSINER’S REFERENCE FRAME

These different frames result in very different pictures of psychological research. The next step will be a critical analysis of each of these alternatives from the standpoint of NT, in order to verify the possibility of finding a promising partner to these therapeutic models.

3.1. A LOOK UPON THE INTRA-INDIVIDUAL MODEL

It is probably obvious that the intra-individual or intra-systemic frame of reference is clearly incompatible with a narrative conception of change. In fact, the narrative approach is a reaction against this kind of framing of the human being – a reaction against the intrapsychological models that have been sustaining most of the therapeutic models, at least since psychoanalysis (Shorter, 1997). Globally, the increasing diversity of models within psychotherapy throughout the 20th century has been faithful to this intra-individual compromise.

Scheff (1999), for example, illustrated this frame of reference (and manifested his opposition) in a more or less common situation for the traditional models of psychotherapy: in a therapy session, whenever the client centres her complaints on the husband, the therapist, through paralinguistic and subtle clues, ignores those remarks about the husband, while re-centring the client on her responsibility in that relationship. Using an intrapsychic model, the therapist is implicitly guided by the principle of the insight – and insight means in this context focusing the client on the discovery of the internal „flaw” that supposedly causes the suffering.

Coherently with the intra-individual framing of psychology, the notion of „insight” heavily relies on the idea of behavioral individual responsibility, assuming that dysfunction always has to do with inner causes. Following Valsiner (2000), this way of making sense of human conduct implies a double movement: firstly, some individual (or even group or cultural) features are projec-

ted into the inner real world as psychological characteristics, and then, secondly, their behavior is explained on the basis of these same features, that are seen as the basic causes.

In the process of construction of these tautological explanations, the internal dimensions become reified and the mind, as the container of these substances, becomes literalized (cf. Szasz, 1996, for a de-reified conception of the mind). The cultural result of this position, as Gergen (1999) suggested, is an expansion of the „discourses about the deficits”, internally located, that would explain people difficulties. Moreover, this discourse about the deficits has been expanding from psychology and psychotherapy to the global culture. During the 20th century, we assisted to a growing influence of the psychological vocabulary in daily life, in which our inner features are seen as the causes of our conduct.

This „psychologization” of our societies does not represent a simple change of words that we use in order to describe old phenomena. It corresponds to a specific way of constructing our own subjectivity with clear historical-cultural roots. As Danziger (1997) convincingly argued, this intrapsychic mode of description would be impossible before the Enlightenment Age, and it is clearly formatted by social and economical factors (such as the growing importance of private property and of individual-competitive economical functioning). Psychology, as a science, has been formatted as the corollary of that movement, resulting in a form of perpetuation and „pseudo-naturalization” of the discourse about our „inner world” (Danziger, 1997).

NT, in their political orientation, aim at the deconstruction of this vocabulary; indeed, they pursue their implications on daily life, in order to understand the imposed constraints and the produced phenomena (e. g., Law, 1997; Nylund & Ceske, 1997; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994). As it was suggested by Szasz (1997), while reflecting about mental illness, this vocabulary sometimes works as an implicit accusation (e. g., „what you say makes no sense because you are depressed” or „you should be more motivated”), but it may operate as an excuse (e. g., „my low self-esteem prevents me from studying”). What this vocabulary hardly hides, to a more attentive analysis, is its moral discourse: instead of „bad character”, we have the technical „personality disorder”; instead of „weak person”, we will say that „the person has poor coping skills”; instead of „someone who feels miserable”, we may claim that „this person has a depression”...

One of the interesting dimensions of this process is that „patients” show signs of a clear understanding of this moral judgement that implicitly lies in this technical jargon. Their resistance to this „psy” vocabulary and their preference for a „medical” or „organic” condition is one of such signs. Associations like the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association members (quoted in Valenstein, 1998), for example, refuse the idea of depression as a psychological condition in order to defend that everything that happens to them is reducible to the action of serotonin. The corollary is that depression is exclusively caused by biological factors. As Valenstein (1998) suggested, we no longer blame the mothers (as it happened with the concept of schizophrenic mother in the 1950s) and we start to blame the brain (reducing all our multilayered complexity to the processes of neurotransmission).

In sum, the intra-individual framing does not eliminate the stigmatizing effect of mental illnesses, since the moral roots of this kind of discourse remain active.

NT reject all this psychopathological vocabulary. From this point of view, we must abandon the notion that everything usually labelled as „mental illness” is the final result of intra-individual processes.

3.2. A LOOK UPON THE INTER-INDIVIDUAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

This framework, still dominant in contemporary psychological research, cannot be tolerated by a therapeutic model that precisely refuses the discourses of normalization – a model that regards these discourses as basic modes of pathologization. There is a clear refusal of this way of doing psychology and their efforts are directed to the deconstruction of its basic assumptions and to the clarification of its implications. For example, Law (1997) argued that the diagnostic label of hyperactivity has been working as a device in the maintenance of the traditional teaching system: the less adapted children become „hyperactive” (meaning here psychological incompetent), and the system remains unquestioned. In other words, there is a deflection of the „guilt” from the system to the incompetent individual. Nylund and Ceske (1997), as another example, suggested that the normalizing discourses about adolescence may work as powerful constraining devices in the construction of subjectivity, namely the discourses about individuation and parental separation (clearly, a North-American ideal). Taking into account these powerful discourses and practices, the adolescent is sometimes located at the crossroads: on one hand, if they choose not to separate from their parents, they will not be considered normal, since they are expected to do that; on the other hand, if they become assertive and separated, they may be at risk of being labelled as „problematic” adolescents.

Narrative therapists go even beyond this, since they actively search for the deconstruction of these discourses in the therapeutic context. Clients are invited to thoroughly examine the way in which these „normalizing” discourses sustain their problematic narratives, namely the discourses that induce suffering for those who are disfavoured in comparison process (those who do not have the ideal weight, that are less perfect than what it is expected, with less self-esteem than normal, or more enmeshed than expected with their parents).

The cultural framing of these problems, along with the negotiation with clients of a shared understanding of the basic assumptions underneath problematic narratives is an essential therapeutic tool within these models. Thus, White (1994) made reference to two distinct practices of power that he systematically challenged in the therapeutic setting: „the technologies of the self – the subjugation of self through the discipline of the bodies, souls, thoughts, and conduct according to specified ways of being ... (and) the technologies of power – the subjugation of others through techniques such as isolation and surveillance, and through perpetual evaluation and comparison” (p. 141). If the first kind of the „technologies” is clearly associated with the intra-systemic framework (since it lies upon the „psy” language – a language that formats the intrapsychic models), the second one is clearly associated with the processes of

comparison with a supposedly universal rule, and therefore, connected with the intersystemic frame of reference.

This deconstructionist attitude clearly feeds the „political activism” to which Monk and Gehart (2003) made reference. Clients may inclusively be invited to participate in political actions that take place outside the traditional therapeutic setting. Thus, for example, people with anorectic complaints may adhere to anti-anorexia lobby groups, developing actions in the community, such as demanding changes in the pro-anorexic publicity or pressuring clothing companies for new policies about the size of the clothes usually available (cf. Madigan, 1998, for a description of the functioning of these anti-anorexia leagues). These actions correspond to a non-individualistic conception of the problems – and of human beings – and they allow the social sustenance of alternative narratives. They are potential forms of validating and celebrating differences.

It becomes clear that when narrative therapists refuse the contribute of psychological models for psychotherapy, they are refusing these two basic frameworks of doing psychology (the intra-systemic and the inter-systemic, following Valsiner’s terminology). Besides, these two points of view feed one another: the search for internal features inside the individual is intrinsically associated with the comparison of certain types of people with the contrasting or even deviant ones (e. g., „the normal” vs. „the psychopathological”; „the anxious” vs. „the depressed”).

Valsiner (2000), concerned with the creation of a developmental perspective within psychology, adds another invaluable comment about these perspectives: he clearly assumes that they create a misleading and static picture of human processes. As such, these two frames are considered uninteresting and inadequate, since they do not keep track of the ever-changing flow of human experience: (development is) „a most difficult target phenomenon – its object itself is constantly changing. The difficulty of study development lies in its complexity, dynamic change and the lack of our common-language terminology that would fit the study of this complexity” (Valsiner, in press, p. 6).

3.3. A LOOK UPON THE INDIVIDUAL-ECOLOGICAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

Developmental psychology (Valsiner, 2000) finds this third frame of reference limitative. Therefore, it is not surprising that it will hardly be accepted by the narrative therapists. The main problem of this reference frame is that it still endorses a form of egological theorization; in other words, the person is isolated of the cultural milieu and, therefore, the individual mind is appreciated as the main instigator of meaning-making. It seems to endorse a perspective that assumes that „there is a world out there” that will be solipsistically *constituted* by this isolated mind.

However, we must recognize some points of contact between this framework and NT, in the sense that they both focus on interaction, and not so much on a completely closed and static mind. Within this framework, the individual is always located and analyzed in the process of relating with a certain environment.

In some way, this resembles the epistemological standpoint of the second cybernetic, which claims that knowing is always an activity: the knower is al-

ways someone involved in some kind of interaction with whom (or what) he or she is trying to know. As Von Foerster (1984) stated, the activity of knowing *is* the activity of interaction and not something occurring beyond that same interaction. However, the major concern for the narrative therapists is not only interaction, but also the social and interactive positioning of the therapists regarding the clients.

The exclusion of culture devoid this framework of any possibility of appreciating the cultural shaping of human conduct. To the narrative models, this blindness of the cultural context leads to an unacceptable deviation of their basic assumptions. As we previously said, within these models, narratives are conceived as culturally constrained, not only in their themes (e. g., success vs. failure; autonomy vs. communion), but also in their canonical structure (cf. Gergen, 1999; Winsdale, Monk, 1999). Moreover, one of the main purposes of this kind of therapies is to make explicit the basic assumptions of problematic narratives, deeply rooted in the historical processes that organize the basic „acceptable” (e. g., normal, functional) ways of being a person. Therefore, there is a great gap between NT and this framework, since this frame of reference would give a „pseudo-naturalized” and „a-historical” perspective about human functioning, something completely divergent of NT’ aims.

3.4. A LOOK UPON THE INDIVIDUAL SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL FRAME OF REFERENCE: FINDING A WAY OUT?

In our view, the individual socio-ecological frame of reference is the most promising partner for an enriching dialogue between psychology and NT. This frame implies a conception of psyche that is *simultaneously* personal and relational, in which culture works as the necessary background for the interaction between people. Therefore, the relational and cultural dimensions of our lives and the semiotic mediation of our meaning-making activities are brought to the foreground.

This way of doing psychology may easily lodge the deconstructional efforts of all those who claim that psychology suffer from an egological centeredness, given that this frame defends a relational perspective for psychology. Therefore, it is completely understandable, within this frame, that it is impossible to describe „psychological problems” as a-symbolical or a-historical phenomena, completely explainable on the basis of the sole individual. To be means to relate and, to relate means to communicate – that is, to perform semiotic exchanges by which a sense of agency emerges.

Of course, there are obvious differences between this approach and NT. Their historical roots are different (e. g., Vygotsky, G. H. Mead or Bakhtin on one side, and Foucault or Bateson on the other) and some topics are clearly discussed in different ways. For example, the notion of human subjectivity or the human psyche is still considered an invaluable concept within the individual social-ecological frame of reference (Valsiner, 2005), something that, as we previously stated, seems downplayed within NT. However, the claims for a „post-psychological” state, in our point of view, just means a rejection of the a-relational, a-historical and a-cultural description of human subjectivity and does not necessari-

ly imply a refusal of human subjectivity (at least, it implies concepts that involves some kind of subjectivity, such as agency, volition, and freedom). Therefore, the dialogue with this different way of doing psychology may be a kind of way out for some of the puzzles and riddles that NT actually face.

In terms of research, we may start by asking how such a frame of reference would describe a therapy session. We would say that such a situation would be considered as a relational system between two different agents highly regulated by contextual features. Indeed, this relational space is organized by implicit or explicit semiotic systems: for example, therapist and client have different „roles” (one is the client and the other is the therapist). These roles are more or less modulated by the kind of social discourses and representations that each of the participants brings to the situation. As such, they work as semiotic systems that canalize the kind of activities that each one may perform in the situation. Usually, the client brings to the discussion a certain kind of problem, and the therapist expects to get the client’s description of what is „going wrong” – or at least, what the client expects „to improve or change”. Each of the rejoinders in this dialogue is addressing the other and, in that process, they are involved in a constant movement of meaning negotiations. All they exchange are signs – verbal and non-verbal expressions that have a potential setting of meanings – and it is expected that within and along this interaction some changes will take place.

Moreover, in the individual socio-ecological approach the process of meanings negotiation will be considered a co-referential movement (a movement by which those two people „talk about the same thing”). However, this movement will also be mediated by what we may call „retro-referential movements”: movements by which each agent (the client and the therapist) communicate to themselves what is going on in this interaction – creating a feeling of what is happening. They are involved in a kind of dialogical movement – in which the best metaphors would be those that imply coordination of movements between two human bodies (e. g., a kind of dance).

Within the individual socio-ecological frame of reference it is coherent to claim that NT usually focus on „language games” or on the „semiotic procedures” that underlie the formulation of the client’s problem and its perpetuation. Both approaches – individual socio-ecological and narrative therapies – establish that these semiotic systems are fundamental elements on the regulation of human activity. Therefore, the efforts of the therapist are canalised by a theoretical semiotic system that suggests that „therapeutic” change occurs whenever the client starts to „deconstruct” the problem. Within the individual socio-ecological frame of reference that would mean the negotiation with the client of new semiotic tools that may lead to new forms of organization and, therefore, to new possibilities of action.

However, to perform research from this point of view will also mean to track the microdevelopmental features of the process. In other words, it will imply to track moment-by-moment changes. Moreover, the three fundamental vectors (the person, the social others and the semiotic processes) must also be taken into account simultaneously. This global picture creates different valuable questions and challenges for narrative therapy research. The final result from this

dialogue is a kind of invitation in which several vectors should be carefully and simultaneously analyzed, namely:

- a) the semiosphere of each moment of a therapy session;
- b) the relational movements between the person and the „social others” (the therapist and all those social others evoked in the ongoing discourse), by which the person and the therapist play a constant dance of positioning and repositioning about different topics (e. g., the „complaints” of the client);
- c) the processes of constant reorganization by which the individual reconfigures the problem and activates different forms of conduct.

We think that this framing of the counselling process may bring several generative questions that may feed new developments for NT. We will give some suggestions even though not intending to be exhaustive.

One may ask what kind of social representations each of the participants may bring to the situation (about the problems, about the therapy) and how this affects client’s appropriation of the new semiotic tools introduced by the therapist? What happens if the client does not accept therapist’s suggestions? Moreover, one may wonder what the best moments to introduce deconstruction strategies are. For example, if the client says something of the sort „I have a hidden talent that I am not using”, probably the therapist will not make any effort of deconstruction. What kind of generalized forms of meaning-making underlie the kinds of problems that are brought to the session? For example, internalization⁴ (see White, Epston, 1990) is always present in the client’s initial formulations of the problem? And finally, how the development of the process is dependent on a kind of movement towards mutual understanding, fed by constant challenges innovations to that same mutuality?

4. CONCLUSION

NT have emerged within psychotherapy as a liberating and contesting movement, deeply involved in a radical change of traditional concepts and practices. They claim that psychology has been dominated by a pretence self-evident egological orientation, centred in an isolated and buried mind. Consequently, they expose and reject this Cartesian tradition, joining all those that defend that knowledge and human activity has a social and relational basis. In their search for alternatives for that traditional orientation, the notion of narrative appears as the main organizer of new forms of understanding the human being and, therefore, as the main tool for change within psychotherapy.

Their deconstructionist theoretical work is, in a way, the kind of work that they propose to the clients: to support them in the creation of a new discursive positioning about their life condition and, through the use of narrative tools, to foster the deconstruction of problematic narratives. Therefore, therapy does not

⁴ According to White and Epston (1990) whenever the problem colonize the person’s identity we have a process of internalization, in which the complexities of the person’s identity gets reduced to the problem’s „identity” (e. g., to organize one’s life around a specific theme like being thin, taking anorexia as an example).

aim at solving the riddle of our interiority; instead, the main purpose of narrative therapy is to dissolve the problem.

On the other hand, this critical positioning leads to some hostility against psychology, something evident in their claims for a „post-psychology” orientation. Moreover, this state of affairs seems to have led to a kind of despise of empirical research, as if „empirical” was something necessarily doomed by a positivistic, egological and traditional point of view.

However, every social practice is assessed in one way or another, and no social practice will survive if it closes itself to the social scrutiny of its purposes, potentialities and results. Therefore, scientific research seems to be essential for the development and sustenance of NT – for the social validation of this practice, but also for the creation of new questions and solutions. In our view, this relative closure to research may have high costs.

In this article, we have tried to contribute to this field reflecting about the possibility of finding a way out of this labyrinth. The guiding question is how to find a way of conducting meaningful research within NT. Borrowing from Valsiner (2000), we distinguish different frames of reference for research within psychology, most of them clearly incompatible with the narrative approach to psychotherapy. Therefore, we take the NT’ „rejection of psychology” as a refusal of those traditional ways of doing research. However, the „individual socio-ecological” framework seems very promising. In our view, it may be a kind of privileged partner with whom the narrative approach may entertain an enriching dialogue. Moreover, if we adopt this frame of reference, we do not find a clear reason to the claims of a „post-psychological” orientation. It is probably the other way around: adopting the individual socio-ecological frame of reference we will probably conclude that psychology is still to be done (and not vanished). Moreover, culture (or language) and the psyche are not seen as two antithetical elements, but two distinct and yet mutually constitutive or united elements.

Within this framework, psychotherapy is regarded as a dialogical space that is culturally or semiotically charged, filled with tensions and constant negotiations – of problems, alternatives, developments and disappointments, ... – in which the therapist and the client are engaged in an indeterminate dance. The analysis of the therapeutic setting is necessarily brought to the foreground, along with the active articulation between therapist and client, on a moment-by-moment basis. Therefore, the research on this field should simultaneously focus on the semiosphere of the sessions, on the relational movements between client and therapist, and the constant reorganization of this continuous flux by each of these agents.

In our opinion, a dialogue with this frame of reference may feed and enrich NT. Also, it would be easier to understand how is it possible to reach the ethical results that they defend (e. g., the liberation of dominant social discourses). In sum, it may lead to a better practice and to the development of new generative questions. However, to ignore these challenges – to refuse empirical research – is probably a quick way of condemning all these therapeutic models to a kind of fossilization.

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