

Psychologist or artist: an invitation to think about the challenges of creating professional identity

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*Always, always recreate your life.
Remove stones and plant roses and
cook treats
Restart.*

(Cora Coralina – brazilian poet)

Life is movement. Because I was far from my city for one year, great part of my routine has been meeting people who I love and who are important in my life in different ways. Last Wednesday I met a friend who told me about her plans for retirement in the next 2 years. Another friend told me about her transition to a new town where she will start her career as a professor. At the same day, I had lunch with a friend who told me, wiping off her tears, about how hard it is to go through the grieving of her husband who unexpectedly died 2 months ago. My neighbor is also grieving and trying hard to recreate her life after the dramatic end of her marriage. My second nephew was born 3 weeks ago. And for 2 weeks I haven't seen my neighbor sitting at the porch as he usually does – I heard he is in an intensive-care unit somewhere. My dear friend with whom I shared my office for many years called me last week to welcome me. She was in the hospital waiting for her first chemotherapeutic treatment for Lupus. At the same time that I meet these friends I say goodbye once again. I am relocating – next Tuesday I move back to Maringá, in Paraná State, the land I left 12 years ago when I came to Ribeirão Preto. For many of my friends, my personal and professional reasons to relocate are not convincing enough and they argue that I cannot leave the stable life that I have built with so much work in Ribeirão Preto in the last decade. And I ask myself: where is the “stable” that they are talking about? For everywhere I look I see life in movement. Silence, serenity and stability are temporary illusions. Very soon life's wagons shakes us and reminds us that the train was not still – it was only crossing peaceful plains. *So is life* – says Guimarães Rosa – *it warms up and cools down, fastens and then looses, rests and later disquiets. Courage is what it demands from us.*

Development is the name psychologists give to this continuous movement of life. And

that is what I want to talk about tonight. But first a warning: there are as many ‘*developments*’ as ‘*psychologies*’ (of course). But many of psychological theories share the assumption that development organizes (and is organized by) an identity that progresses as the person advances in a given direction. What if identity is not a single but a multiple feature? What if development, instead of a linear progression, happens simultaneously in a variety of directions? The idea that our history develops linearly is an effect of the narrative we tell about ourselves. As we tell our stories, we lend life an organization that comes from the narrative structure we are using. In order to do that, we edit and exclude anything that doesn’t fit the story: dead-ends, shortcuts, alleys, hesitations, wanderings... What is left is the clean final version of a messy history. This story creates the illusion of a single character – one identity – this one that I call ME. But what if what I call AM is in fact an ARE?

Those who live the academic life are frequently invited to produce a narrative about their professional life that we call memorial. The memorial is a CV in a narrative form. A friend who is applying for a position as a teacher in an Education department had to write her memorial. Nowadays, she is considering applying for another position, in a quite different area. She told me she would have to re-write her memorial in a way that her narrative produces a character that seems attractive for those in charge of selecting the best candidate for that position. I am not using the word ‘character’ in a negative sense. I don’t believe there is a true self behind the fictional character. If the sense of who we are emerges from a narrative, and if every narrative is limited and edited, if we are always a little more than the stories we are able to tell about ourselves, thus, our characters are not false representations of who we are, they are fragmentary and always incomplete representations. I am not saying that there aren’t false characters. Maybe a character can be an imposter – a character deliberately built by lies, programmed to illude, take advantage, exploit, oppress and steal. But that is not my focus for this conversation.

Therefore, I take development as a movement in multiple directions that composes multiple possibilities to narrate a performative and circumstantial identity. This development is not acquisitive – it is creative. And it is hampered by alienation.

Let me try to explore this in more detail.

Development is becoming who we are by the performance of who we are not. This perspective on development is sustained by Lev Vygotsky theory and was formulated by Fred Newman and Lois Holzman from the East Side Institute in New York.

An example: how does the baby start speaking? The baby mumbles some sounds. Adults around him/her complete the meaning of these sounds: “you are thirsty!” “it is a dog!” “Mommy!”. Strictly, the baby is not saying anything. He/She doesn’t know and doesn’t control the signs that compose language. However, adults relate to him/her “as if” he/she were able to speak. The baby is an actor that performs speaking – speaking that he/she ignores. Adults (supporting roles in this play) complete and support baby’s performance. When the baby says: *mmmie, omie*, we say: “OH, you want mommy!” I don’t know anybody that says: “I will stay here and stare at you until you learn how to correctly say what you want!” In that sense, adults don’t relate only with what the baby is, but they also include what the baby is becoming. The baby becomes an able speaker by his/her clumsy performance of a speaker. He/she doesn’t learn how to speak before start speaking. He/she becomes what he/she is by the performance of what he/she isn’t yet.

I like this perspective on development because it gives me hope. We often spend much

time relating to people, choices, and life as if they **were**, and we forget to include the perception of what they are **becoming**. And who we are becoming is often, the most important aspect of who we are. In a relationship, for example, we say: my husband is, my wife is, I am... We define the other and ourselves excluding who we are becoming. Who are we becoming in this relationship? How can I respond to my partner that considers who he is becoming? What about a psychology course? How can I relate to my students looking for who they are becoming? How can I be a partner and help them in a process of creation, and not acquisition, of their professional identities.

One example: when I was a professor, my students were often very anxious in class as they got closer to their graduation. They wondered and debated about the kind of psychologists they would be. And they talked as if there were a *menu* from which they could pick a choice. For those who wanted to be clinical psychologists the choices were very narrow: they would be psychoanalysts or behavioral analysts. And this was the narrow horizon of their choices. Very narrow. I used to answer: "choose anyone, it doesn't matter. It is where you start, not where you arrive." My students suffered because they understood that the psychological approach they choose would determine the kind of therapist they would be. They thought their choice determined a path they should diligently walk through until they reach their destination: the ideal therapist. But approaches don't make the therapists – it is the therapist that creates, recreates and transforms his/her approach. This choice – and maybe all the choices we have – are starting points, not destinations. We choose where we begin (and we are always at the beginning, even when we are done) but we cannot foresee where we will arrive. We decide where we go and we often arrive at somewhere else.

The danger of relating to our choices as if they were destinations – and not starting points – is to stop seeing ourselves as authors of our own history and to lose the creative perspective. From the vantage point of "arrivals", choices are definitive. They become products in our existential shelf. Time and path from the present-self to the desired-self is shortened and ignored. When the destination is valued more than the trip, traveling is not fun. – it's only time and space that separate us from our desire. All the horizon is reduced to this drop of dream.

I am speaking about the difference between product and process. The problem with psychological theories that define identity as a single, stable and linear acquisition is that they create an identity that is a product. For me, identity is a process. When we miss the process-dimension and relate only with the product-dimension we are alienated. Process, product and alienation are words used by Carl Marx in his analysis of the formation of modern capitalist society. The alienated workers are those that do not see themselves in what they do, because they no longer participate in the full process of production. They may screw bolts in an assembly line, but they don't participate in the full production of a television (for example). They don't know how to make a television – nobody at the factory floor knows. They screw bolts all day long for a salary they get at the end of the month that, maybe, will allow them to **buy** a television. The alienated person becomes the consumer. Very easy to see in the man-at-the-factory in Marx's analysis... much harder is to distinguish it in ourselves. But I will try...

For some time I worked as a clinical psychologist. I met many patients. I saw many alienated men and women trying to buy and consume a therapy that would give them another identity.

I also worked as a professor. I saw many alienated students. Students that bought a course that would grant them the right of a new identity after 5 years: they would be psychologists. Some were bad students. They didn't care much about what happened between the first and fifth years. They were solely looking for the "certified-psychologist" product that would be theirs after paying the 5 annual installments of "being-student". However, other alienated students were good students. They read, studied and diligently accomplished all their student obligations. That was their way of paying their five installments. They were alienated because they thought that being a psychologist was a result of "completing assignments". They renounced their creative possibilities and they were compromised by the consumption of a certification. A few students related to the psychology course as a process of creation of what they would call "psychologist" in the future.

Some people stimulate me to finish my doctorate program soon so that I can start applying for a position as a professor. I understand that and I also feel the urgency sometimes. But looking for the end of my program, specially thinking about the "so-that-I-can", turns my program into a product, and alienates me from the process through which I became a PhD. What will make me a PhD, if I ever become one, is not the end of my program, but the process of creating what in the future I will call PhD. What makes you psychologists is not the end of your course or the certification you will get. It is the process though which you create the psychologists you will be. It is so obvious that we forget.

I know it is not easy to resist alienation in a world where acquisition rules. Consumerism discourse is so seductive that it is impregnated in so many dimensions of our lives. Relationships for example, are commonly reduced to market and consumer transactions. So are politics. In a few months we will have our presidential elections. My vote can be the currency that buys a "product-candidate". After the elections, I can complain that the product does not correspond to the advertisement. If politics were a process, my vote would be the beginning of a relation with the candidate. I watched the television electoral program and I couldn't identify a single candidate that was inviting me to create anything with him. All of them presented themselves as "desirable" (or more precisely undesirable) products and they were asking me to buy them. Their promises were meant to tranquilize me: "All you need is to vote on me. After elections, I will take care of you, don't worry." Who is the candidate that invites you to do something more than just voting? The rationale that reduces politics to voting is the same rationale that alienates us from the historic process. We don't make history. With our votes, we buy people who will do it for ourselves. And we no longer trust in the history they create. We inhabit in a terrifying discourse of hopelessness. World is presented to us as world without future: apocalyptic forecasts about the planet's destination, distrust in the human capacity of transformation and overestimation of destructivity and violence. This skepticism, that is moreover skepticism towards humankind, demands us to retract from political and social spheres. We shrink since we no longer see ourselves able to deal and change the face of misery that surrounds us. Our horizon of dreams and projects become individualized, self-centered and lonely. Hopeless and without believing we can participate in the creation of a collective history (this political and social history) we seek refuge in the creation of our individualized history – a history that does not sustain us once it doesn't transcend us.

And that is some of alienation that a lot of psychology can provide. The emphasis in the individual, the focus on finding myself and self-improvement create the illusion that the answer to my dissatisfactions can all be found if I immerse in myself. However, how much can I develop before reaching the limits of the context in which I live, and which development I haven't been taking care of? Psychology can alienate when favors the detachment from individual and the social context. It can alienate when discourages people to see themselves as creators of a history that is larger than themselves. It alienates when promises change if we sink into ourselves at the cost of more and more consume of therapy. Therapy can alienate when promises personal transformation and doesn't cultivate the client's desire and potential to also transform the world.

The exit from alienation is rescuing the creative potential. When we create we reactivate our historical voice and assume our place as co-authors of the world in which we live. This is my present challenge: to counter alienation and reactivate my creative capacity.

My parents had 3 children. My older brother became an artist. My younger brother became actor, director and theater producer. I became a psychologist. Maybe, that is why I am so invested in understanding psychology as an artistic creation. It is very important for me to build a creative, poetic and artistic psychology. My challenge is to use this art as a way for political and historical transformation.

What is your challenge? How have you been alienated and how can you reassume the authorship of your life? As a student, how have you been creating the psychologist you will be? Do you create or consume your psychology course? How can you embrace your choices as starting-points? How can you develop an appreciation for what life is becoming, not only to what it is?

At last, I would like to read an excerpt from Mia Couto's book. I want to read it to my friend who is going to retire, to the other friend who will start a career as a professor, to the other one who is grieving her husband and to another who is recreating her life after separation; to my baby nephew and to my sick neighbor; to my lovely friend who lives and fights with Lupus; to my partner and me who are moving to another town soon, and of course, to all of you, students and professors who are creating your professional identities:

“For most of our life, we don't actually live. We waste ourselves in spread lethargy that, for our own illusion and consolation, we like to call existence. For the rest, we are *'fireflying'*, lit only at brief intermittences. A whole life can be turned upside down in a single day by one of these intermittences.”