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Journal

Dialectical Anthropology: An Independent International Journal in the Critical Tradition Committed to the Transformation of our Society and the Humane Union of Theory and Practice, 34(3)

ISSN

1573-0786

Author

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Publication Date

2010-09-01

DOI

10.1007/s10624-010-9204-8

Peer reviewed

Comment on Boyer’s multiattentional method

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Published online: 15 August 2010

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Spurred by Rabinow’s (1999:181) aspiration “of making something new happen in a field of knowledge” but wary of pronouncements that smack of “rejecting theory as a norm of intellectual practice,” Boyer asks us to reflect on “how we should best understand theory as intellectual practice.” He sets the stage through a stimulating look at the development of social theory in the European tradition across several centuries, aimed at revealing the roots of contemporary expressions of concern, including Rabinow’s, “regarding the exhaustion, crisis, or failure of theory” despite “epistemic abundance.” In light of this discussion, he queries: “Is it sufficient to say that theory is a method of framing data, of determining causality, or of producing a meta-reading?” After referring to Bourdieu’s depiction of the “proscriptive, authoritarian capacities of the ‘theory effect’” (1991:106), Boyer goes on to mention his own work on “theory as language, specifically as an exclusionary register of professional communication and as a medium of value-circulation through practices of citation.” However, rather than continue to list the “purposes” or “functions” of theory, Boyer proposes a “new way of thinking about social theory in terms of specialized analytical attentions” and “new ethics of theoretical complementarity” grounded in the explicit cultivation and valuation of what he calls the “multiattentional method” of analytic engagement.

In another piece, Boyer (2008:39) defines intellectuals as “knowledge specialists...especially...those who operate as members of professional networks in organizational or institutional contexts.” I found it useful in writing this commentary to slightly reframe the orientation of understanding social theory as intellectual practice to one of understanding social theorizing as the practice of intellectuals. Further, despite, or perhaps because of, the discussion concerning “para-ethnography” in relation to the “*de facto* and self-conscious critical faculty that operates in any expert domain” (Holmes and Marcus 2005:237) and the

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jurisdictional quandaries purported to arise in treating the theorizing of representatives of “cultures of expertise” as data for anthropological theorizing, I found myself pondering what may be left out by primarily focusing attention on theorizing as the practice of knowledge specialists. I also mused whether “the question of how the representative of one culture of expertise (the anthropologist) can claim legitimate analytical jurisdiction over the members of another” only troubles anthropologists researching “cultures of expertise” or whether such meditations reflected more pervasive concerns with the privileging of the anthropological observer’s perspective over the claims to knowledge of those we study (cf. Good 1994, ch. 2; and in line with Boyer’s comments about “epistemic contingency”).

To turn to what may be left out, there is the question of those aspects of the “para-ethnographic,” as portrayed by Holmes and Marcus (2005), which are not explicitly discussed in Boyer’s article. Holmes and Marcus ask (p. 237): “How do we make ethnography of the para-ethnographic found in the marginal ways of knowing” such as the “anecdotal” and “intuition” and even the “visceral mediation of the para-ethnographic”? Even accepting their status of marginality in “cultures of expertise” or “within technocratic regimes,” such ways of knowing can be viewed as issues of broad relevance for anthropological inquiry. The ubiquity of narrative or storytelling throughout the world as well as their presence in “cultures of expertise” (such as biomedically oriented professionals across a range of specializations) offers support for the position that narrative as a way of knowing is a fundamental human way of giving meaning to experience (see, e.g., Garro and Mattingly 2000). It has been proposed that through allowing “people to comprehend a complex flow of action and to act appropriately within it,” “narrative thinking is the very process we use to understand the social life around us” (Carrithers 1992:78).

From another vantage point, a recent article examining the relevance of Husserl’s theory to language socialization points out that Husserl did not view his notion of “theoretical attitude” as “something restricted to intellectuals or scientists.” Rather, he considered the “theoretical attitude” to be an integral part of everyday experience, involving attention, that is entered whenever “we make a particular experience into an object of our reflection (e.g., the object of an evaluation)” (Duranti 2009:213). For research purposes, the relevant realm of theoretical attitude encompasses when “the anecdotal,” an intuition, or a physical feeling is deemed a way of knowing and is communicated at some time, in some form available to another. (Parenthetically I note it is not uncommon for retrospective accounts provided by knowledge producers of their creative processes to report ways of knowing akin to those raised by Holmes and Marcus [see, e.g., Csikzentmihalyi 1996].) Whether or not adopting this lens helps in addressing the issues raised by Holmes and Marcus, the implications of this line of thinking for anthropological theorizing and research clearly extend beyond the study of language socialization.

I also want to bring into the discussion the issue of whether Boyer might have prematurely foreclosed the discussion of the “purposes” or “functions” of theory by drawing attention to those salient in discussions of contemporary academic endeavors. It seems critical to raise one “function” of theory widely posited as fundamental for human beings, namely the constructive role of theory in orchestrating our understanding of, and guiding action in, the world. One line of

argument is that the sheer magnitude of information potentially available in the world (or any configuration of a social world) necessarily leads to selectivity in what is implicitly attended to, and this selectivity develops in concert with experience through participatory engagements in cultural settings (further discussed in Garro 2005). While I also do not consider it necessary to “rehearse...the rather elaborate discussions of attention as an epistemic mediator between percepts and concepts that have emerged within phenomenology,” the saying, attributed to William James, that “you can’t count rocks in a field without a theory” (Agar 1996:75) offers a launching point. Underpinning Bourdieu’s pronouncement that “social science must include in its theory of the social world a theory of the theory effect” is the view that by “structuring the perception which social agents have of the social world, the act of naming helps to establish the structure of this world” (1991:106 and 105).

Relatedly, numerous anthropologists, across diverse cultural settings, have explored how what is ontologically accepted as a potential social actor (e.g., witches, ghosts, spirits), and their capabilities, enter into the construction of what is taken for reality (or accepted as plausible or potentially plausible), motivating the claim that “assumptions about the nature of the universe become, as it were, a priori constituents in the perceptual process itself” (Hallowell 1955:84). With reference to ethnographic examples involving illness, including situations of “trouble” with the potential to be construed as illness, some of my own work has theorized how culturally available explanatory frameworks (or theories), including their ontological assumptions, impact on what is selectively attended to, endowed with meaning, and remembered (e.g., Garro 2001, 2005). The importance of “theoretical attitude” through reflections on explanatory (narrative) possibilities expressed at different points in time while individuals were in the midst of dealing with a troubling situation, critically informed my theorizing on their theorizing, especially in situations where afflicted parties conveyed apprehensions that others were attempting to cause them harm in a covert fashion (by means of what is conventionally labeled as sorcery in anthropology). The priming of attention for additional indicators consistent with such apprehensions is an example of what I refer to as “effort after meaning.” I use this phrase, borrowed from Bartlett (1932), to broadly refer to meaning-construing processes which may, but do not necessarily, involve conscious reflection. I view “effort after meaning” in everyday life as a jointly cultural-cognitive-social process, linked to and dependent upon our social involvements within specific settings (Garro 2003, 2005).

Complementary to the preceding, although working within a different theoretical framework, Charles Goodwin’s (1994) research on how proficient practitioners of a field—for example, archeology—instruct the less expert, appears to align with Boyer’s delineation of “different theoretical languages and practices as distinguished principally by specialized attentions.” Through carefully analyzed interactions Goodwin examines “how participants build and contest *professional vision*, which consists of socially organized ways of seeing and understanding events which are answerable to the distinctive interests of a particular social group” (p. 606). Such learning of a new perspective on reality is underpinned by the way “linguistic symbols...are used by people to induce others to construe certain perceptual/

conceptual situations—to attend to them—in one way rather than another” (Tomasello 1999:128).

I am not entirely sure I have grasped what a commitment to “multiattentional method” and an “ethics of theoretical complementarity” would entail, so to speak, on the ground with regard to the reflective analytic engagement of theory and data. Still, to the extent that multiattentional method as a practice of social theorizing by intellectuals is predicated on the ability to take multiple perspectives on what transpires in social settings, it seems relevant to note analogous abilities to entertain and assess multiple perspectives have informed anthropological theorizing in other settings as well (where the focus is not primarily on professionals or “cultures of expertise”). Within my own work, I have examined narrative accounts to show how “effort after meaning” need not run along a single path but may reveal the play of alternative interpretive possibilities with regard to a given situation or state of affairs (Garro 2003, 2005). In this view, narrative thinking as culturally informed perspective-taking relies on resources for meaning-making available in a cultural setting. Instances of reflective theorizing (or to use the broader term, “theoretical attitude”), advanced as explicit theorizing statements or conveyed through narrative, offer explanatory perspectives on how a particular state of affairs has come about and what this may mean for the future, such as assessments of how one could act to help bring about a desired future or take steps to avoid what would be unwelcome (e.g., Garro 2001, 2003, 2005, 2010). Observations of social interactions, accounts of what transpired in a social interaction, following an evolving situation through time, and interviews, offer windows on everyday theorizing, evidencing the assessment of multiple locally available explanatory frameworks. Such reflexive efforts of actively considering interpretive plausibilities may be distributed through time (and proffered by different social actors), perhaps signaled in shifts in how a situation is named or in how the relevance of explanatory frameworks are reassessed in light of new experiences. Theorizing in such everyday settings also leads to situations where two distinctive frameworks may co-exist as relevant or as potentially or variably relevant, within the same temporal frame.

Other work on theorizing as part of everyday life based on research with “English-speaking, Caucasian-American families” by Ochs and colleagues draws attention to parallels between collaborative storytelling in family settings, and theory-building and critiquing in scientific and scholarly settings. They propose that “family storytelling is a particularly rich locus for cultivation of skills critical to engagement in the world of theory” and analyze collaborative interactions to show how “perspective-taking, critical thinking, and theory-(re)construction come into play as narrative ‘facts’ and ideas are presented, pulled apart, and reinterpreted” (Ochs et al. 1992:38). Viewing processes of scientific and other scholarly thinking as “predicated on the assumption that human awareness gains from cultivating the ability to step out of our world of ‘fact’ and sometimes rigid convictions in order to consider alternative explanations and multiple perspectives on our reality,” they maintain that family and other everyday discourse practices “draw upon and socially engender cognitive and linguistic skills which underlie the intellectual discourse of science and other educational domains that our society validates and

that our schools are tasked to instruct" (Ochs et al. 1992: 39–40 and 38). The "two realms," they conclude "are not so far apart" (Ochs et al. 1992:67).

With this backdrop, I will turn to theorizing as the practice of intellectuals and the potential for "theoretical innovation." Like theorizing in other contexts, I see theorizing by intellectuals as grounded in the human ability to "learn not just *from* the other but *through* the other" (Tomasello 1999:6). Also relevant is the claim that people "appear to *think in conjunction or partnership* with others and with the help of culturally provided tools and implements" (Salomon 1993:xiii). Through attention to and reflection on both "theory" and "data" (recognizing that such cultural resources for understanding may not fit so neatly into these categories), ethnographic inquiry is both enabled and constrained by our efforts to learn from, with, and through others.

From this perspective, while we may claim sole authorship, in important ways our knowledge productions are not ours alone (of course, I could refer to Bakhtin and cite others as well). Even more broadly, although the full implications of this cannot be explored here, Csikszentmihalyi, writing against the standard view of creativity as "some sort of mental activity, an insight that occurs inside the heads" of people, maintains that creativity is more appropriately seen as happening "in the interaction between a person's thoughts and a sociocultural context" (1996:23). Bolstered by material from interviews with creative people across a wide range of fields, he contends that making a "creative contribution," one recognized through "external" or "social confirmation," requires "internalizing the fundamental knowledge" of at least one domain, or subdomain, of knowledge (1996:25 and 47). He notes:

Each domain expands the limitations of individuality and enlarges our sensitivity and ability to relate to the world. Each person is surrounded by an almost infinite number of domains that are potentially able to open up new worlds and give new powers to those who learn their rules (Csikszentmihalyi 1996:37).

The "growing (sub) specialization of social theory" in the European tradition discussed in Boyer's article can be seen as manifestation of an even broader and longstanding historical trend toward specialization in domains of knowledge. As this occurs, "it becomes increasingly difficult to master more than one domain of knowledge" because "attention is a limited resource" (Csikszentmihalyi 1996:9 and 8). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1996:9), "it is important to recognize that given how little attention we have to work with, and given the increasing amounts of information that are constantly being added to domains, specialization seems inevitable."

Boyer's proposal for multiattentionality "demands a conscientious and difficult commitment toward multiple analytical specializations and an ethical orientation toward not allowing one set of analytical concerns to harden into a conceptual dogma that overshadows or trivializes other analytical concerns." As a desideratum, an orientation toward "theoretical complementarity" aimed at "enriching our knowledge of the world," the proposal warrants admiration.

But I find it harder to envision how developing the requisite skills would impact on ethnographic research. As Boyer notes, the underlying skill of multiattentionality is “obviously much more difficult” to acquire than that of reflexivity. Further, reflexivity seems to be less a distinctive feature of this proposal. The value placed on “modes of analysis” that “recognize and reflect on the specialized attentional basis of theory” is by no means limited to multiattentional method, though, more often than not, the reflexive focus is on how a single theoretical framework directs attention to specific aspects of the social world. Multiattentionality is at the heart of Boyer’s call for transformative practice.

As my comments so far indicate, to the extent that there are operative constraints on the realization of “multiattentional method” these would seem to lie not so much in the abilities of intellectuals to engage with and evaluate alternative perspectives, but rather with the constraints of “limited attention” associated with the necessary commitment of time and effort needed to become, and to become socially recognized as, a specialist in a domain of knowledge. Further, the constraints of limited attention seem magnified when the multiattentionality is couched at the level of multiple specializations in some of the broad theoretical frameworks mentioned in Boyer’s article (e.g., praxiology, semiology, psychoanalysis) where the mastery of literatures and attendant analytic skills already contributes to the proclivity for theorizing within a single conceptual specialization. To the extent that different modes of social theories are also enmeshed with differing epistemological orientations to data, what would this mean for anthropological research? What are the educational implications? Are multiple areas of intense theoretical specialization to be selected before engaging in research? Or is this proposal less ambitious in scope than one might take it to be? Should the core attentions of a diverse range of perspectives be a foundation in graduate education? Should reflecting on the core attentions of a range of theoretical attentions become a “rigorously cultivated” aspect of social theorizing as part of the process of anthropological research? Would merging insights or juxtaposing analytic attentions from “psychoanalytic” and “phenomenological” perspectives, for example, require something more than a narrowing of attention to the theorizing of two scholars chosen to serve as representatives? Or, given the view that both ‘productive human activity’ and ‘desire/repression’ might be “fundamental to experience,” is the goal to formulate and carry out a research project along these lines?

Although this may seem a digression, I would like to turn to an article by Evans-Pritchard entitled “Some Reminiscences and Reflections on Fieldwork” published in 1973, the same year that he died. In it, he extolled contributions to “theoretical” as opposed to just “factual” knowledge. Even an “idiot,” he maintained, “can produce a new fact; the thing is to produce a new idea” (p. 3). Evans-Pritchard was clear on the interdependence of theory and observation: “One cannot study anything without a theory about its nature”—“some general view of the nature of the phenomena being studied” (p. 2 and 3). Accordingly, “the first imperative is a rigorous training in general theory before attempting field-research so that one may know how and what to observe, what is significant in light of theory” (p. 1). And while he did mean “a thorough grounding in general theory” (and he clearly read widely throughout his career, and not just within anthropology, with an eye to

finding works by others useful in illuminating his ongoing work), he credited specific works as particularly influential. To select one of his examples, he noted: "I am sure that I could not have written my book on Zande witchcraft in the way I did or even made the observations on which it is based had I not read the books written by that noble man Lévy-Bruhl" (p. 1). This is, of course, different than saying that he could not have written a book on Zande witchcraft without reading Lévy-Bruhl—simply that if he had, it would have been a quite different book. But neither can it be said that Evans-Pritchard adopted Lévy-Bruhl's theoretical framings or general theoretical perspective vis-à-vis the purported "psychic unity" of our species (although much transformed, variants of these two theoretical positions, including attempts to bring them into potentially productive dialog, remain part of the anthropological landscape, see Garro 2005:57–58). Evans-Pritchard selectively drew on what he considered Lévy-Bruhl's theoretical strengths while developing a different stance to what he considered problematic in Lévy-Bruhl's theoretical vision (see Gillies 1976:xx–xxi).

Further, it was also the case that Evans-Pritchard reported being "guided" by the interests and compelling concerns of those he studied, having "no interest in witchcraft" before going to Zandeland or in cows before working with the Nuer (p. 2). With regard to Zande witchcraft, the productive synergy of thinking through and with "theory" and "data" (including Zande theorizing) deepened after he returned home and embarked on the "decisive battle" that resulted in his influential tome. At an early point in this book, Evans-Pritchard discussed the potential limits of some theoretical constructs (labels) or "tools" he created and acknowledged that readers might object to his analytical categories (1937:11–12). In subsequent research, finding the Nuer "almost totally disinterested" in any notion similar to witchcraft, he found himself able to approach questions about the attributions of misfortune "as it were through different lenses, in different perspectives," a "fruitful" line of inquiry leading eventually to his book on Nuer religion (pp. 2–3). And while he saw the "British intense emphasis of field-research" as contributing to a situation where "everyone is so busy writing up his own field-notes that no one has much time to read books written by others," he also lamented that he managed to incorporate in his publications "only a portion of my Zande notes" (p. 3; he also mentioned being "plunged into teaching" as a limiting constraint, p. 10).

In bringing Evans-Pritchard, and more specifically his book on witchcraft, into this discussion, I realize that any extended consideration would require attention to the epistemological complexities of his intellectual endeavors (see, e.g., Good 1994, ch. 1; Engelke 2002) and other critiques of his work. But just as it has been productive for anthropologists to examine the limitations of modes of inquiry from the anthropological past, perhaps it may also be worthwhile to ask whether past struggles to contribute to social theorizing, including attention to the intellectual practices underpinning these contributions, offer any help in thinking through new, continuing and overlooked strategies (perhaps requiring revamping) for fostering an orientation toward, as Boyer puts it, "openness to new signs of the real."

Does Evans-Pritchard's recommendation for a general grounding in theory have any continuing resonance? Bearing in mind the limits of attention, I think there is much to be gained in creating intellectual environments that promote openness to

and consideration of a wide range of theoretical perspectives. For this reason, I find stimulating Boyer's notion of developing skills for considering a variety of theoretical perspectives in terms of their inattentions as well as their attentions. Developing skills promoting deeper intellectual engagements with a range of resources for meaning-making available for scholarship within academic settings (e.g., theoretical perspectives as advanced in publications, research methods) equips us with resources that may potentially be drawn upon at some stage in the process of carrying out and writing up research. Such skills promote our abilities to generate alternative explanations for and adopt multiple perspectives on what transpires in social settings.

Evans-Pritchard maintained that while preparing to undertake anthropological research was critical, the journey could not be foretold. His message is that if we are open to discovering the new, we must appreciate that the questions we seek to answer often emerge through our efforts to understand what we observe in the course of doing anthropological research. In navigating the complexity of attempting to understand "witchcraft, oracles and magic" as comprising an "ideational system" (1937:2), what Evans-Pritchard (1973) referred to as testing hypotheses is perhaps better characterized as involving the explicit assessment of the values and limits of selected pre-existing theoretical perspectives (as resources for understanding) in light of guided observations. In this process, he found the lens provided by some aspects of a published theoretical perspective helpful, without feeling compelled to adopt the whole. The critical engagement of published theorizing and his guided observations and inquiries through participant observation research resulted in the publication of a distinctive theoretical vision available to other scholars (and rich material for theorizing from other perspectives). His monograph's attentions and inattentions contributed to the ability of other anthropological researchers to ask different questions about witchcraft and explanations of misfortune, from a range of theoretical perspectives across different ethnographic settings.

It is such proliferation of work and theorizing, as I understand Boyer's argument, that has contributed to the "widespread sense of a contemporary dilemma for theory as intellectual practice." I have not felt compelled to engage in "crisis talk," but given my own interest in culturally available explanatory frameworks relied upon in situations of "trouble" in a Canadian Anishinaabe community, I can vaguely envision complementary research endeavors attentive to both, for example, "psychodynamic" and "materialist" theoretical perspectives, "modes of analytic attention" that I have not directly engaged in my work. And though it is not a research project that I would find compelling, I would not discourage someone else from adopting a "multiattentional" approach along these lines. Still, I do not think my lack of personal enthusiasm is due to a failure of imagination, an unwillingness to engage with other theoretical perspectives, or a questioning of their value in understanding aspects of the world.

Rather, given the other demands that pull on me and the constraints of "limited attention" which I feel rather acutely, just as Evans-Pritchard did, I think it is more my sense that there are other lines of anthropological inquiry that would allow me to contribute more effectively to theoretical discussions. Not that I have any grand

scheme for the future, just a sense of how I want to continue working through some of the ideas and research projects that currently engage me. In the past, however, I have designed research aimed at explicitly assessing different theoretical claims, aspiring to give each claim due consideration throughout the process. Also in the past, similar to Evans-Pritchard, I have found it theoretically productive to carry out research aimed at addressing the same set of research questions in two quite different communities, especially as the attempt in the second community challenged aspects of the theoretical paradigm in ways that took me quite some time to work out an appropriate theoretical framing (see Garro 1998a, b). I also note that Evans-Pritchard searched for theoretical perspectives, at times crossing disciplinary boundaries, to help him think through the process of theorizing data and refining his claims. Selecting intriguing theoretical claims from larger theoretical frameworks to address questions arising from my research has been a generative process for me. Still, my more enduring explorations have been with theoretical framings that complement and extend my ability to think through problems of longstanding interest to me. Further, some of my scholarly endeavors (writing, research, and co-teaching) have involved working closely with scholars who share some overlapping interests, but whose academic backgrounds are quite different from mine. Although challenging, the value of such collaborative endeavors has extended beyond the specific project and, in my view at least, has had the salutary effect of helping me gain confidence in engaging with a wider range of theoretical resources than before these collaborations.

While the theme of “how little attention we have to work with” is a recurring theme for Csikszentmihalyi, a little before one such pronouncement, he states that “creativity generally involves crossing the boundaries of domains.” If there is validity to that claim, I realize that it does not necessarily mean that crossing the boundaries of domains leads to creativity. A bit later, he notes a paradoxical tension between the enjoyment of making “connections with adjacent areas of knowledge” and the pull toward specialization and single-mindedness. And although, as noted earlier, Csikszentmihalyi sees the continuation of the trend toward specialization to be almost certain, he also states that “this trend might be reversible, but only if we make a conscious effort to find an alternative” (1996:8–9). Perhaps multiattentional method with its “conscientious and difficult commitment” can offer opportunities for bridges over what may seem to be ever-widening chasms.

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