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Title: Impressive analysis of meaning-making and symbols

Year: 2012

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Kallio, E. (2012). Impressive analysis of meaning-making and symbols. *Theory & Psychology*, 22(1), 130-131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354311401484>

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Impressive Analysis of Meaning-making and Symbols

BRADY WAGONER (ED.), *Symbolic Transformation. The Mind in Movement Through Culture and Society*. London: Routledge, 2010. 336 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-48848-8 (hbk).

What does the word 'symbol' mean? How is it different from the concepts 'sign,' 'signal' and other similar terms? In the introduction to the book, the editor clarifies the major theoretical traditions in which 'symbol' has major importance: symbols as resemblance, conventional signs, internalized relations, displaced desire, and group objects. The book is divided into four major sections focused on semiotic foundations, transformations of experience, transformations through the life course, and finally transformations of identity.

The meaning of the terms is of major importance to the chapter authors, and in this respect, the book fulfills one important function: it is impressive to read strict conceptual analyses of the different meanings. This theme of conceptual clarification repeats itself throughout the entire book: many of the authors try to define the boundaries of concepts, and commentaries are added after each section of the book to encourage further discussion. Also, the chapter authors discuss and reflect on each others' articles, which creates a feeling of coherence and mutual understanding. At the same time, various viewpoints are discussed and some synthesis—or at least some connections—are made.

The study of symbols entails the use of many words, of which some are very abstract. Thus, strict conceptual analysis is definitely needed in order to achieve some agreement on the use of terms such as 'sign', 'symptom', 'signal' 'signifier', 'signified', 'representamen' or 'interpretant', 'representation' and 'semiotic object'. Each of them is of importance, but different scholars use different terms. Muller and Carpendale make a good point in claiming

[...] Psychologists do not tend to worry about these questions, preferring to leave these issues to philosophers, who have spent much of the last century grappling with

these problems. Theories in psychology are, however, necessarily based on assumptions about meaning, and any adequate account of the development of symbols must come to grips with these questions. (p. 232)

Why do we have a capacity to use signs? Only human beings use symbols in communicating with each other, an ability lower-level animals lack. Our relation, as human beings, to the world and reality is always meaning-making through the use of signs and symbols. They are used for mutual social understanding, although it is not always clear if identical or similar meanings are shared between persons. In any case, one basic element of everyday life is to figure out what the nature of reality by using symbols from our cultural context. The human mind is like a mirror symbolizing reality. The title of the book emphasizes that mind is embedded in culture. Indeed, the meanings of some symbols can be understood through the lenses of an implicit cultural and historical *Zeitgeist*. For example, for the Renaissance people, the symbolism hidden in Botticelli's painting '*La Primavera*', in which there are ten different flowers, might be obvious, and in Florentine culture, the flowers in the painting all had different, implicit meanings (Levi-D'Ancona, 1982). In modern times, however, we understand the flowers as flowers and nothing else.

Many theories of symbols have been advanced by Freud, Jung, Cassirer and Piaget, among others. These are discussed, supporting the book's claim to be a new interdisciplinary synthesis for modern times. To create a synthesis is a considerable task, and one book naturally cannot do it all. Nevertheless, the authors discuss with each other and draw connections between various models and claims. It is a modest beginning, but a very good one.

This is an intriguing book. It does not open its' depth at a glance and is not an easy read, demanding more than a single reading to understand its' complexity and multiple

layers. Hopefully, scholars in the modern world will have sufficient time to read and assimilate a book of this kind.

References

Levi-D'Ancona, M. (1983). *Botticelli's "Primavera": A Botanical Interpretation Including Astrology, Alchemy and the Medici*. (Arte e Archeologia S. v. 20). Firenze: Olschi.

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