

# Research Is Literature: Exploring Borders Between Arts And Sciences

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I draw on Fathali Moghaddam's expression from his 2004 article "Psychology is Literature", to expand that idea and delineate the notion of "Research is Literature". I propose an epistemological debate supported by two specific theoretical contributions: the first is the philosophical concept of border – as it is discussed by philosophers Achille Varzi and Gaston Bachelard- which will help us place the undertaking of research as standing in-between the realms of art and science. The second will be contemporary cultural psychology's contributions on some specific points, such as: human development as a boundary crossing phenomenon; and the narrative paradigm, which brings the idea that constructing narratives about ourselves and the world is a way of making sense of reality. Once supported by these contributions, I will approach some borders between researching and writing, trying to answer three specific questions from a personal point of view: first, when we write about our research, are we doing research? Second: are we already researching when we think about doing research? And lastly, are we doing research when we publish? Approaching the borders between researching and writing will be a way of proposing a theoretical development of the concept of border and, at the same time, proposing an epistemological debate on the definitions and limits of research: research as the act of producing a narrative about the world, an act standing in an in-between zone which both separates and unifies traditionally distinct domains of knowledge and human expression.

"Under certain aspects, talking about the boundaries of Chemistry is just as useless as  
talking about the boundaries of Poetry <sup>1</sup>"  
*Gaston Bachelard*

This ongoing investigation proposes a few reflections on the practice and logic of research. The term "research" is used without any complements – as in "applied", "scientific", "artistic", "basic" etc – for one main reason: from a personal academic standpoint, one of my most important research questions has been trying to understand the possible convergences and disconnections between the ways of doing research within the arts and the sciences – and that effort requires a broad, generic way of looking at what research is.

Thinking about qualities and certain subtleties of research is a task which, once accomplished, could frame this work into one which belongs to the sociology of science field. I am aware that sociologists of science – and I refer here especially to the great contributions of Bruno Latour (1997) – have, for a few decades now, dedicated themselves to show us that doing scientific research is an activity as governed by a set

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<sup>1</sup> This is our translation to English from Bachelard's quote, found originally in Portuguese: "Sob certos aspectos, falar das fronteiras da Química é tão inútil quanto falar das fronteiras da Poesia".

of methodological rules and understandings of what constitutes reality, as by variables more mundane than we would like to admit – deadlines and financing, institutional connections, friendships and even insights produced by a poem or song. These reflections are extremely relevant and have been much discussed by scientific communities interested in the subject – and this is why I will not focus on them. Differently from a strictly sociological discussion, I propose to think about an important, close, but not always clear relationship between researching and writing. In 2004, psychologist Moghaddam Fathali published an article called *From 'Psychology in Literature' to 'Psychology is Literature'* (Fathali, 2004), in which he explores precisely the possible relations between those two fields. I draw inspiration from this article to expand that notion and propose the idea that “research is literature”, and will try to explore the links between the two. More specifically, by exploring those relations, I will be assuming that research is an enterprise standing on an epistemological **border** between arts and sciences. For that, I pose some questions in that direction, and pursue some possible answers for them.

### WHAT IS A BORDER?

Stating that research is an activity on some kind of border requires a conceptualization of this concept. Since Aristotle claimed that the border or extremity would be the first point beyond which it is not possible to find any part of something, and the first point within which every part that something (Aristotle, 1984) is, a number of philosophers have tried to deal with the issue of borders or other types of divisions of the world. Contemporary philosopher Varzi (2013), having extensively written on the subject, has suggested that a border – or a boundary, as he prefers – is any kind of entity demarcated by its surroundings. The notion is so central for our representation and organization of the world that it applies to physical objects (natural, geographical landmarks, for example); temporal events (the beginning of a war, a birthday etc) and concepts and categories – social positions, professions and, as it is the case of this article, fields of knowledge. But in spite of stating that tremendous importance, Varzi (2011) also reminds us of the extreme difficulty that lies in clearly defining the concept of border. He guides us through instigating metaphysical debates that attempt to understand whether boundaries are natural or artificial, sharp or vague, bodiless or bulky and so on. He brings out Socrates' famous recommendation that we should carve the world into its “natural joints”, written by Plato (1969), and not to splinter or divide it into completely arbitrary decisions as to how it must be organized and understood. Scientists have taken that recommendation very seriously, according to Varzi; but he suggests a compromise solution for the two extremes – are all boundaries imaginary and that means we can draw them anywhere we like? Or should we just pay attention to the natural pre-organization of the world and just obey that classification? He concludes his philosophical “tour” on the subject proposing that perhaps all boundaries or borders are on a closer look, *de dicto* (that is, artificial or constructed); but from that thought, it does not follow that they must be utterly arbitrary or lacking any foundation in reality (Varzi, 2011). In benefit of the discussion about research I'm proposing, it is important to have in mind that a boundary is something that separates and unifies at the same time.

In that sense, Gaston Bachelard's contribution to the definition of border is particularly fruitful to the debate, as he proposes the specific notion of *epistemological border* (Bachelard, 2012). Can this concept have an absolute meaning? “Are we subject to an

immutable reason?”, the French philosopher asks (Bachelard, 2012, p. 69). Metaphysicians would claim that, within the realm of science, the concept of epistemological border is clear, for a scientist simply cannot reach nor answer some basic, fundamental questions about the real world: therefore, one could never really answer what is matter, light or life in itself.

But Bachelard claims that, in order to set the boundaries of scientific knowledge, it is not enough to point at its inability to solve certain issues – a scientist could well argue that a problem not solved is actually a problem which was not properly formulated, and this is why we could not answer it. The philosopher’s plea is that claiming for some kind of impossibility of investigation does not imply a limitation in thinking. Scientific thinking is essentially a kind of thinking which assumes the reality before getting to know it, and that can only recognize it as an achievement of its supposition (2012, p. 72). To the scientific spirit, says Bachelard, to sharply trace a border is to surpass it: the scientific border is not a line; it is a *zone* of particularly active ideas (p. 71). That position is consistent with Varzi’s definition of the border as something that unifies and separates at the same time.

Aside from philosophy, cultural psychology’s contributions on the concept of border refer to some basic aspects: first, as having real implications for individual psychological functioning, being found operating within the individuals’ mind (intra-psychological level of analysis), in-between people (interpersonal level of analysis), in between social groups (group or comparative level of analysis), etc. (Marsico, Cabell, Valsiner & Kharlamov, 2013). Second, we refer to the narrative paradigm (Bruner, 1991), which brings the idea that constructing narratives about ourselves and the world is a way of making sense of reality.

### **CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY: BORDERS TO CROSS AND STORIES TO TELL**

Although not systematically dedicated to that specific term, some highly relevant cultural psychology’s contributions have somehow dealt with the notion of borders or boundaries since the 80’s, when Valsiner already addressed the importance of *constraints* in human development (Valsiner, 1987): those would “delimit different areas of the field (‘zone’) and so canalize the development of the organism” (1987, p. 90). Furthermore, according to Padden (2000), these constraints can be considered principles which conduct the semiotic nature of human personality; the process of constraining “involves the activity of placing *boundaries* [*italics added*] upon something to limit how it is conceived and/or used (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003, p. 727). And this is precisely how reciprocal processes of internalization and externalization of personal and social messages take place in development – social and personal worlds are constantly mutually constraining each other in ways that lead to transformations in both (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003). The idea of inclusive separation, also brought by Valsiner (Valsiner, 1998; 2012), refers to an interdependent relationship between the person and the environment which is exactly where culture is placed in cultural psychological theory.

The implications for human psychological functioning stated by Marsico and others, when authors claim that borders are abundant in our everyday life (Marsico, Cabell, Valsiner & Kharmalov, 2013), relate directly to that mutual constraining process.

Further back in time, we locate Vygotsky's contributions to the psychological importance of borders in human development through the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). The highly debated concept postulates a relationship between learning and developmental processes, classically stating the zone of development as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). As the concept has already been much discussed in academic and educational circles, we don't need to make a thorough presentation of it; but for our purposes, it basically means that, somewhere in-between learning contexts with different levels of guidance; that is, somewhere on a border, the child develops.

Another relevant contribution for discussing the ways we do research comes from Cultural Psychology's – but not just that specific field – orientation towards narratives as methodological tools in research. Narratives actually have become much more than a method or data production technique, as it is possible to speak of a *narrative paradigm* (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998), or locating the "paradigm shift" (Mitchell, 1981) in the beginning of the eighties, when, according to Bruner (1991, p. 5), "psychologists became alive to the possibility of narrative as a form not only of representing but of constituting reality". When it comes to constituting reality, it is probably more accurate to acknowledge that narratives are a "version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and 'narrative necessity' rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness" (Bruner, 1991, p. 4); in that sense, narratives could only achieve "verisimilitude", for which reason they can be considered a distinct paradigm in what comes to scientific research. Bruner is certainly one of the most representative authors within this paradigm, claiming that it is more important trying to understand how human beings construct their worlds than establishing the ontological status of our psychological processes' products (Bruner, 1998). Some of these ideas on narrative as a way of constructing our own world can help us think on research as literature: doing research is not exactly grasping some content or fact about the world, but it involves, above all, a "cognitive achievement" – an expression also brought by Bruner (2004) – regarding what *we think* reality is. And that cognitive undertaking has also a narrative nature – as we struggle to make sense of what we see and to answers the questions we have.

## **RESEARCH IS LITERATURE: BORDERS BETWEEN RESEARCHING AND WRITING**

Once we have acknowledged that there is a connection between researching and writing, I will now approach some specific borders between those two, trying to answer three specific questions: first, when we write about our research, are we doing research? Second: are we already researching when we think about our research? And lastly, are we doing research when we publish?

**When we Write about our Research, Are We Doing Research?** I have personally asked myself that question in some situations of my academic trajectory. Especially when I was an undergraduate student, I would be told by my advisor to write an abstract for a congress or any kind of scientific event, considering that the research was not yet finished; and I, as a beginning researcher, was striving to make sense of what the object of my specific investigation really distinguished itself from the other

participants'. My advisor, always sensitive, bright and extremely motivated, once referred to an abstract as a "postdated check". It probably means that we project a few things in an abstract, and a couple of (or more) months later, once it becomes an oral presentation or a written piece, these ideas previously projected are "materialized". The cognitive and narrative achievement mentioned by Bruner (2004) is very visible in this situation, since we struggle to conclude things and to explain to others how we eventually came to think of what we have previously written.

In similar, although symmetrically opposite situation, I was already teaching psychology for undergraduate students, and I proposed, in a Community Psychology course, a practical work in order to investigate the current practices in which those professionals were involved in our city. We read and discussed theoretical texts, elaborated an instrument for data collection – a semi-structured interview; and the students organized themselves in couples to collect the information. In the end of the semester, all students presented their data and we discussed it in the large group. At that point, I noticed there were some interesting data to be disclosed, and asked if one of the students would like to help me organize them in an article or oral presentation. One girl in the classroom volunteered to do it; we got together to proceed the discussion and I oriented her how to organize the interviews altogether – which she did. A few weeks later, I submitted an abstract of that work in a research seminar at our university. When the seminar came close (dangerously close, I must say), a few months later, we quickly sat down to organize the presentation – how it would go, which of us would say what, and so on. On the presentation day, I saw the student posting on Twitter she was feeling unsure about the oral presentation, as it was based only on an abstract. As I found the commentary very curious – and at the same time saw some of my student concerns in it – I also felt the urge to tell her that, although we hadn't written down the paper from beginning to end, we had been through the traditional stages of the research – discussing a theoretical background having a specific question in mind about the most important features of the professionals at stake; we had methodological procedures and a technique of data collection – the interview; after these steps, which took place in the class with all students, we both organized that route, described it on an abstract and presented it to an audience in a seminar. When I look back at such an episode, I am not sure I could have told her something that would really reassure her. I believe those are understandings that only some more experience can give us. Anyway, the writing of a research still seems to grant us some comfort, a safe harbor in which we can assert: "I have done a research on X". What is not clear is this boundary: when it comes to research, writing is in-between the anticipation answer of a research question, as it can also be its retrospective account.

**Are we Already Researching when we Think about the Research?** I could not promptly answer "no" to this question, as I might be claiming here to be sharing a few reflections on research – that is, things I have been thinking about. To start with, I am fairly satisfied with the very generic idea that to research something is to make yourself an honest question – that is, a question whose answer does not seem very clear at the moment – and try to answer it in the way you find most appropriate (and viable within one's practical and intellectual capacities). I would risk making an analogy with a very popular sentence from John Lennon: "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans", he would have said. I have found myself thinking that the method in what takes place while you are planning the research – maybe while you are writing

the method section. Or even research happens while you are planning it, thinking about it. I believe we are researching when we think about our research; but also acknowledge that this might not be all there is to it. It is not enough to think about something specific to call it research; as intuitive and chaotic as we might be in our minds, some order is necessary to research something. In that sense, this question is very much related to the first one. Because it seems important that the researcher (again, it does not matter the area) might be able to build some narrative of what he is thinking and researching – this structuring of a narrative would qualify as some kind of order. And if, as it has been mentioned before, humans make sense of their lives through the construction of narratives; in a similar way, I see that research can be a narrative about something that disquiets us – or to use the terminology adopted by Bruner, it is a narrative constructed on a non-canonical event in our lives (Bruner, 1998). It seems that doing research is exactly standing on the border between what we are thinking of doing and what we are in fact doing – but this border might be more artificial (or *de dicto*, the expression used by Varzi) than one would like.

**Are we Doing Research When we Publish?** I believe this is the question with the shortest answer so far. But I must state it differently. In the similarities among thinking, writing and publishing – or, we might say, within the borders or zones of contact thinking, writing and publishing share with each other – I believe that publishing is the act or step the most litigiously connected to the others, or simply the one step most distant from the other two. But the question is laid down, because I sense its answer has been less and less frequently “no” – so no, researching and publishing are two different things – mainly because of institutional pressures suffered by universities and research centers, which have generated important debates and conflicts between academic communities and agencies of research funding and regulation. Although I can speak mostly for my country, Brazil, I sense it is also an issue in others, such are the power relations between science and society. Valsiner (2006) uses the Bordieusian concept of social capital and its derivative, scientific capital, to state that “scientific publishing is a form of creating new social capital that is used in the negotiation of livelihood of the scientists, their institutions, and their prestige in a given society”; the author also locates a contemporary change in the knowledge construction process which assumes that in our age, the models of scientific communication become much less linear and more dependent on the Internet. For our specific discussion, it becomes evident that the act of publishing (and profusely, one might add) becomes not only a symbol of power, but actually a sort of currency in the epistemic market; but in the same article, Valsiner reminds us that, although communication (and publication, we might add) is central to progress in science, knowing actually transcends the various forms of communication (Valsiner, 2006). Similarly, once again using literature as a comparison, we could argue that an unpublished poet is still a poet. Certainly, in the case of research, publishing is extremely important – precisely because we never do research by ourselves. When we ask ourselves a question and try to answer it, we do so with the help of real or virtual interlocutors – authors, theories, academic events and so on. This is only possible because these ideas and persons are somehow accessible to us. But assuming that researching and publishing completely overlap might be an overstatement.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: THE ACT OF RESEARCH ON A FRUITFUL BORDER**

After trying to respond to these questions – although I feel that posing them is a much more productive effort than answering them –, I go back to the central theme of this piece: if the act of writing is a fundamental aspect of a research process – even though it is difficult to determine the exact relationship between them, it is possible to say that research is on a border which, as we have seen, separates and at the same time unifies enterprises such as art (literature, more specifically) and science. Fathali's (2004) article, whose title triggered the initial ideas for this work, has great contributions to the subject. Assuming the possibility of a highly abstract and close relationship between psychology and literature, the author disclaims the traditional assumption that psychology and literature would be complementary, since the first would be "culture-free" and the second, "culture-bound". He argues that this distinction is completely unfair – particularly in reference to psychology, which since the late 1960's has pointed out that the very questions addressed by traditional psychology are selected through the influence of cultural biases (Moghaddam, 2004, p. 515, 516). In order to show that doing literature and doing scientific research in psychology are not endeavours that different, he makes a curious comparison between William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a book about English boys who are stuck on a desert island and must suddenly govern themselves with unfortunate results; and Muzafer Sherif's (1966) classic study of intergroup relations among boys in a summer camp. Although the first one is clearly fictional and the second one is on actual boys – and with enormous contributions to the field of social psychology –, it is fair to claim that Sherif imposes an arbitrary structure onto the behavior under investigation – the experimental condition of introducing a superordinate goal to make the groups of boys to cooperate with each other. For Moghaddam, not only arbitrary structure, but also interpretation and storytelling are present in Sherif's study, just as in Golding's fiction – an imaginary account, although with great verossimilitude – one of the main features of narratives according to Bruner (1991). Moghaddam concludes that, at a greater level of abstraction, psychology is literature – but he could well be talking about research.

I have just proposed, in this article space, a narrative: I gathered and ordered ideas in a way I could produce a sense of response to the concerns I have as a researcher – in sciences – psychology, especially – and in the arts. I could argue that not only research and its writing have many features in common with a literary narrative, but can also think in a broader way: also the ascension and decline of a scientific paradigm, as classically depicted by Kuhn (1987) also resemble the succession of beginning, development and end of a narrative – which will probably be told by historians of science later. I understand, therefore, that doing research is, in important ways, like telling a story.

Doing research is standing on a border, where scientific standards and artistic procedures meet and at the same time distinguish themselves. And this is so, because as we trace a border, we surpass it (Bachelard, 2012). Semiotician and literary theorist Roland Barthes (1978) tells us that science can be coarse, and life, subtle; and literature would exist to shorten this gap. His striking vision of literature and its forces is helpful at this point: for him, one of the forces of literature would be to take on many types of knowledge; through literature, we can know things; we can learn about the world – he refers to this force by using the Greek term *mathesis*<sup>2</sup>. But in spite of being a source for our grasping of reality, literature never grants us with a completed, total expertise of

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<sup>2</sup> The word translates from the Greek as the knowledge; science; the act of learning.

the world, but instead, it gives this knowledge an indirect place. The kind of knowing literature yields us is always partial – and so is the knowledge produced in sciences, we might add. Barthes actually states an interesting relationship between science and literature: he argues that they have similar secondary features: they do have similar content; they are systematic; and most importantly, they are both discourses – only they assume in different ways the language which constitutes them. Whereas science traditionally uses language as an instrument; literature is *within* language. Language is the *being* of literature (Barthes, 1989a, pp. 4, 5). Nonetheless, resorting to scientific discourse as an objective instrument of thought is postulating a neutral state of language, a referential code which would be the basis of all normality; and by that, says Barthes, science is arrogating to itself an authority which must be precisely contested by the act of writing. The notion of writing implies “the idea that language is a vast system of which no single code is privileged” (Barthes, 1989a, p. 9); and neither would be any kind of discourse – social, scientific, literary and so on.

As researchers, we are story-tellers (Moghaddam, 2004), and that pushes research onto a border. Again, another of Barthes’ contribution works as an analogy to the act of doing research. In a conference entitled *On Reading* (Barthes, 1989b, p. 42), he reflects upon the act of reading and claims that, although we usually believe that reading is decoding or deciphering a message, it is actually the act of producing, accumulating language – an act of overcodification. And in a similar way, instead of conceiving research as an act of finding out something that is already out there in the world, it is the process of producing a story: there is the beginning, development and the end of it; there is someone who tells it, as some other person who reads or listens to it, making sense of it all. And it might be precisely in the engendering of that story – its motives, sudden sheers and upshots – that we do research – that is, produce knowledge on our reality. And it is not the case of qualifying this as doing science *or* writing literature; the border in which these actions find themselves may be nowadays the most exciting in-between zone where research – in arts, psychology etc – could be.

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