

# The Jerome Bruner Library treasure

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Libraries are as important for science as laboratories. Actually, for a lot of disciplines, libraries are the laboratories. I have been working as a librarian in a research library for more than 35 years now, and there is no place I would rather work. Getting the opportunity to process Jerome Bruner's "Gelehrtenbibliothek", a German term which perfectly captures the idea of a 'scholar's library', has been an unexpected and wonderful treat.

I remember when I first read Pim Levelt's email, in which he proposed shipping Jerome Bruner's private library to Nijmegen. I was away on holiday and read his email in Porto Cathedral on a Sunday afternoon in September 2016. It immediately got me excited but I had to wait for the next day to discuss it with my colleague Meggie Uijen and our then chair of the library committee, Gunter Senft. All three of us immediately agreed that this was a great opportunity.

Jerome Bruner's books arrived on December 5th, 2016, in 140 boxes. We did not know how many books there were, or any of their titles. Three years later, all 3248 books were on display on specially designed shelves. Bruner's collection comprises a wealth of topics in cognitive psychology, linguistics, psycholinguistics, developmental and educational psychology, anthropology, and philosophy. We already had 338 of the book titles in our regular collection, a mere 12%. Needless to say, the Jerome Bruner Library is a real addition to our institute.

The Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics library started with a small collection of books in 1980. Nowadays our tasks as librarians in a research institute mainly involve supplying documents, archiving our researchers' publications in a repository, integrating the publications on our website, and providing information about

open access. Our researchers publish primarily in journals rather than in books. In terms of book acquisitions we are a small research library. In the course of the 40 years that the institute exists, we have gradually acquired a collection of about 40.000 books. Therefore, receiving more than 3000 books at once was a huge challenge and we were grateful that we could hire another team member for our library, Rob Matser, who helped us with cataloguing the books.

We had no prior experience in processing a private library, but we immediately loved the job. Contrary to our normal book acquisitions, these books had been read and contained comments, annotations, dedications, bookmarks, and underlines. We wanted to make all of these searchable and visible.

We already had an elaborate procedure in place for our regular library acquisitions. For instance, we always scan the book's cover and its table of contents, and catalogue the separate chapters of edited books.

To catalogue the Jerome Bruner Library books, we added additional "fields". Our colleagues at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Sciences in Berlin were impressed with our ideas and advised us to add provenance notes. We added two different provenance notes:

- 'Legacy private scientific collection of Jerome Bruner': This note is used for books which are definitely from the collection of Jerome Bruner.
- 'Legacy private scientific collection of Jerome Bruner (not confirmed)': Some books had been donated to an antiquarian bookshop. We have been able to retrieve these books but could not be entirely sure that all of them had belonged to Jerome Bruner's collection.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of a personal library is the additional content in the books. We used the footnote field in our cataloguing template to list the presence of handwritten text, comments, dog ears, or underlines. Rob became ever more skilled in identifying handwriting, adding notes such as "with comments by Jerome Bruner on one Post-it note on page 226", or "with comments and underlines by Carol Feldman". Some fragile books were repaired

with bookbinder glue and other tools used by bookbinders.

We also scanned all handwritten personal dedications (e.g. by Oliver Sacks, Albert Michotte, and Bärbel Inhelder) and other extras like correspondence, business cards, recommendations, boarding cards, invoices, and shopping lists, and attached each scan to the book's descriptions.

Furthermore, we added additional metadata tags to be able to find a specific Jerome Bruner Library book in our general MPI library catalog.<sup>2</sup> We used these labels for the tags:

- 'Brulib': to identify all Jerome Bruner Library books
- 'Not confirmed': to identify books possibly from the Jerome Bruner Library
- 'Comments': to identify books with comments, underlines, etc.
- 'Dedication': to identify books with handwritten dedications
- 'Note': to identify books with special content

This makes it possible to fulfil requests like “a book by Luria with ‘speech’ in the title and dedications”.

It had always been our intention to have Jerome Bruner's books on shelves together, as a separate collection outside the normal library stacks. This is very uncommon nowadays. Libraries hardly accept legacies anymore, and if they do, they normally stipulate that the books have to be shelved within their normal collection.

In the spring of 2017, the Institute's ground floor – including the library space – was to be redesigned. The library space was largely transformed into a common ground area, leaving the actual library much smaller. Shelves for another 3300 books as a separate collection were not in the planning, as nobody could have foreseen this.

We eventually found space for the Jerome Bruner Library in our new, modern wing. The design of the shelves both reflects the modern feel of our newly refurbished ground floor but – mysteriously – also resembles Jerome Bruner's library in his New York apartment. However, we had some initial trouble with the shelves, starting with the original design. In the first plan, the books were to be locked behind glass doors. This was not our intention, as we wanted the books to be fully accessible. A new design plan was drawn, and in January 2019 the shelves (8.6 meters long and 2.75

meters high, adding up to a total of 54 meters of shelving space) were installed.

In his New York apartment, Jerome Bruner had kept his books in alphabetical order, so we decided to do the same. Alphabetical shelving means that books from different disciplines are next to each other, which encourages browsing and discovering new titles.

Sorting alphabetically sounds easy, but it raised a lot of questions. We had to decide how to sort books by the same author, and how to sort multiple copies, editions, or translations of the same title. We discussed this together with our library committee members. The books are now sorted by first author, and then chronologically. Multiple editions of the same publication are shelved together based on the date of the first edition, while translations go together with the original. This is an elaborate scheme and putting the first 100 books in the right order took us three hours.

Librarians shelve books vertically in segments. However, from our personal experience, we assumed that our users would be expecting something else. We asked interested staff walking by the shelves how they would shelve the books. Everyone said that they would start at the top left corner of the highest shelf, then go horizontally all the way along (8.6 meters), and then continue with the second row on the left. We decided to do what our users would be expecting!

As the books were not kept behind locked glass doors, they needed to be marked as belonging to the institute. The books were assigned a unique call number, printed on a gray colored label. The call number indicates the Jerome Bruner Library location, the first three letters of the author, and a consecutive number based on the sorting order above. From March 2019 to September 2019 we assigned the call numbers, attached the labels, and placed the books on the shelves. During this time, more and more staff members were noticing and browsing the books, showing their appreciation for the project.

Next, we designed a library sign with the message that the books of the Jerome Bruner Library are meant for in-house use only, and are not to be removed from the premises.

We had also received a box with items that we came to call the “Bruner paraphernalia”. These were photographs and objects from Jerome Bruner’s apartment and office. A glass cabinet arrived just in time for the official opening on January 8th, which now displays these objects together with some of the more fragile books (such as Bruner’s dissertation and his collected papers, which are bound together in twenty volumes).

While cataloguing and processing these sometimes rather dated books, we were delighted to find connections to current events. On May 15th, 2019, it was reported that it was Susan Sontag and not her husband Philip Rieff who wrote the famous book about Sigmund Freud (*Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer*).<sup>3</sup> We had just processed the book on Freud two days earlier, and were saying to each other: “Did you read the news? We have just unpacked and processed that book”. Moreover, in 2020 Jerome Bruner’s works and ideas on racism, injustice, and inequality remain important issues in the news today.

I often get asked what is the oldest, most interesting or most valuable book. The “oldest” book is a book about Spinoza from 1901. However, the value of the collection lies in its entirety and not in a single book. Books with dedications, comments, and underlines are unique copies. They are irreplaceable. There are 1114 books (36%) with either comments, dedications, or underlines in the Jerome Bruner Library.

In December 2016, Pim Levelt wrote a small piece about the Jerome Bruner Library in the Psychological Society’s Observer, which triggered some interest from historians of science.<sup>4</sup> We had to postpone any requests for visiting the Jerome Bruner Library until August 2019, when we invited the first historian of science to visit and study the books. This was really rewarding as we could see how this unique collection can be used by historians.

We also contacted the Harvard University Archives, which house Bruner’s archive, which contains papers, correspondence, research material, and writings (nearly 61 meters). Robin McElheny, archivist with the Harvard University Archives, created a web page with links to information about Jerome Bruner, including his archives at Harvard as well as our library.<sup>5</sup>

As stated in the beginning, it has been a unique and unexpected opportunity to process a “Gelehrtenbibliothek”, certainly in a time

when printed books are almost vanishing from libraries. I am delighted that we can now offer this rich collection of books to our staff and students, as well as visiting scholars.

<sup>1</sup> See chapter by Willem J.M. Levelt *The alpha and omega of Jerome Bruner's contributions to the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics*

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mpi.nl/page/library>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/did-susan-sontag-write-seminal-book-attributed-her-husband-180972178/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/remembering-jerome-bruner>

<sup>5</sup> <https://guides.library.harvard.edu/hua/jeromebrunerarchive>