





## Subjectivity and life: in memory of Fernando González Rey

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I first met Fernando González Rey in 2008, when a group of psychology undergraduate students, like myself, were organising an academic event at the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and invited him for the opening session. We had neither money, nor experience in this sort of initiative, but having the opportunity to welcome such an academic legend in our city became a dream to us. Fernando was very friendly and informal in all communications we exchanged at this time, breaking hierarchical protocols and inviting us to an authentic conversation, as was his usual style. Not only did he accept our invitation, despite our unpretentious academic event, but when he attended, it felt like he had been teaching us for years! His presence, enthusiasm, humble generosity, alongside his deep theoretical argumentations, had a great impact among undergraduate, master's and doctoral students, as well as among the university professors.

During his visit, I was lucky to be assigned as his main host and had the chance to show him the city of Ribeirao Preto and walk around book shops, cafés and downtown squares. We talked about psychology, epistemology, politics, history and shared personal stories. Fernando presented his interesting and bold ideas in a very singular way, and with a deep interest in what I also had to say. I was astonished by his capacity to deeply value a spontaneous dialogue with an undergraduate student. I still remember his words: “For me, to be a brilliant person does not mean having written books and being famous for them. It means the capacity of seeing beyond, of being able to transcend oneself, regardless if we are talking about a child or a consecrated author.” He taught me to understand, by his own example, the crucial bond between theoretical production and human values, which refers to the inextricable relationship between science and ethics. Then, he started to say that, after that day, I became his youngest friend. And I can say that, after that same day, he changed my life. Fernando became not only the greatest master's and PhD supervisor I could ever imagine, but also a father, a friend and a brother to me – all at once.

After the event, when we were saying goodbye, he asked me: “Will you do your PhD with me in Brasilia?” At that instant, I felt as if a whole life pathway was opening in front of my eyes. This was a particularly strong quality of Fernando's, both as a supervisor and as a person: he could see beyond the present moment and used this view to permanently open academic and life opportunities for others. Interestingly, for him, academia and life were interwoven. I was fortunate enough to be one of the people for whom his view created opportunities. And he offered this view with such conviction that he could immediately convince a person that these opportunities were not vague dreams, but vital realities awaiting to be lived. Indeed, Fernando could dream even further as he taught us to create different realities by working to enact our dreams too.

Regarding the aforementioned academic activity with Fernando at the University of Sao Paulo, we asked him to suggest one or two of his papers for us to read in advance. He sent us three of his books, his generosity astounded us: (1) *Qualitative Epistemology and Subjectivity* (Gonzalez Rey, 1997); (2) *Subject and Subjectivity: A Cultural-Historical Approach* (González Rey, 2003) and; (3) *Psychotherapy, Subjectivity and Post-modernity: A Cultural-Historical Approach* (Gonzalez Rey, 2007). These books, alongside others (González Rey, 2004, 2005), introduced us to the consistent

theoretical, epistemological and methodological steps Fernando had been taking to construct a theory of subjectivity within a cultural-historical approach.

Each of these books presented us with an innovative perspective in psychology, promoting a more integrated vision of the psychic compared to other theories and overcoming different dichotomies still present in psychological theories, such as individual/social, symbolic/emotional, internal/external and conscious/unconscious. All this, of course, has a history, which has been presented and discussed in depth elsewhere (González Rey, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; González Rey & Martínez, 2017a; González Rey, Mitjás Martínez, & Goulart, 2019), but which might be worth presenting briefly at this point.

Fernando González Rey was a Cuban psychologist, who concluded his Ph.D. in Psychology (1979), along with a degree of Doctor in Sciences (1987) in the former Soviet Union. Since 1995, Fernando was based in Brazil, alongside his life and academic partner, Albertina Mitjás Martínez. He was especially influenced by L. Vygotsky, S. Rubinstein, L. Bozhovich and V. Chudnovski in terms of his initial theoretical focus on personality from a cultural-historical perspective. Fernando's Ph.D. thesis was supervised by V. Churdnosky in the laboratory led by L. Bozhovich at the Moscow Institute of General and Pedagogical Psychology.

Gradually, Fernando started to advance the concept of communication and to criticize the limits of the dominant concept of activity in Soviet psychology (González Rey, 1983a, 1983b, 1985). The link between communication and personality was developed in his thesis for the degree of Doctor in Sciences in 1987 in the Institute of Psychology at the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union, whose director was B. Lomov. The concept of communication was also an important bridge between his work on personality and social psychology, which was strongly developed in this Institute by then, following the integration of two traditions: (1) the research project led by S. Rubinstein, whose main disciples and colleagues were K. Abuljanova, L. Antsiferova and A. Bruschlinsky, and (2) the research project developed by B. Ananiev and V. Miasichev in Leningrad (B. Lomov was a disciple of B. Ananiev).

Fernando's orientation toward social psychology, which began in Moscow, continued its development as a result of his active participation in the critical social psychology movement in Latin America from the mid-1980s. He began to highlight the importance of the concepts of subject, personality and subjectivity for social psychology. Fernando worked collectively on Latin American social and political psychology alongside other well-known Latin American authors, such as I. Martín-Baró, S. Lane, M. Montero, J. M. Salazar and B. Jiménez. This group claimed the importance of advancing a critical social psychology that takes issues specific to Latin American seriously, instead of the traditional mimetic reproduction of North American and European models that characterized psychology in the continent. In 1991, the recognition of Fernando's significant contribution led to his award of the Interamerican Psychology Prize.

With his book *Qualitative Epistemology and Subjectivity* (González Rey, 1997), Fernando started a new moment in his work by emphasizing the consequences of his previous works for the development of a theory of subjectivity within a cultural-historical approach. This study of subjectivity implied a new set of research lines and publications in which the unity between theory, epistemology and methodology became central (González Rey & Martínez, 2017a, 2017b). His research fields expanded, as well as his dialogue with other theoretical perspectives, such as social representations theory, psychoanalysis and social constructionism (González Rey, 2003, 2005, 2017). In his last two decades, his research interests focused on the development of the theory of subjectivity from a cultural-historical approach and its epistemological and methodological demands in different fields, such as education, health, psychotherapy and social community psychology.

Fernando started to discuss the topic of subjectivity on the basis of a new ontological definition that defines it as a symbolic-emotional system (González Rey, 2014a, 2016a, 2018). The symbolic-emotional unity, represented by the concept of subjective sense, transcends the traditional intrapsychic and individual reductionism that has characterized the use of the concept "subjectivity" in psychology and other social sciences (González Rey, 2017; González Rey & Martínez, 2017a). At the

same time, this unity overcomes the social reductionism that has prevailed within cultural-historical psychology, which has historically associated psychological processes with reflections or internalized social operations (González Rey, 2013). His definition of subjectivity emphasizes the idea that individual and social spheres can be integrated as “realities” that share a subjective character, in a contradictory way, without one being reduced to the other (González Rey et al., 2019).

From this point of view, subjectivity has a culturally, socially and historically located genesis. However, it represents a generative system, rather than an epiphenomenon of other dimensions. This aspect allows the emergence of individuals, groups and institutions as subjects of human practices. The concept of subject is defined as a proper path of subjectivation that implies the generation of alternatives to certain normative social spaces, exerting creative options in a life path (González Rey & Martínez, 2017a). In this sense, this concept does not imply individualism and the assumption of rational control, but the permanent capacity for unpredictable options, rupture and creative action. Fernando’s theory of subjectivity is a critical theoretical framework in relation to dominant psychology because it opens a new avenue to explain singular individual and social human creations as inseparable from broader social dynamics.

After moving to Brasília alongside Albertina and their son, Fernando worked in different universities across the country, and chose University Center of Brasília as his main workplace. He gradually became the leader of different research groups elaborating and advancing his theory of subjectivity in Brasília and a close collaborator with dozens of others in different states of Brazil. His effort to consolidate a research team with multiple research lines and frequent joint activities has contributed to the training of dozens of PhD’s, who gradually started to occupy important academic positions in Brazil and internationally.

After years accompanying Fernando’s work daily, I am a witness not only to his permanent and tireless dedication to his investigations and theorizations, and his commitment to the development of scientific thinking in the face of new emerging challenges both in society and in his intellectual pathway, but also to the importance he achieved as an author for many research groups in Brazil, in Latin America and in other parts of the world. An expression of his relevance in the Brazilian context was the *First Qualitative Epistemology and Subjectivity National Symposium* in 2017, in which dozens of research group members from 21 of the 27 states attended, as well as participants from other Latin American countries, such as Cuba, Peru and Colombia (the second event will take place in Brasília in October 2019). Another expression of the impact of his work in different parts of the world was the constant invitations as a speaker at various international events and universities in countries such as Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Spain, Australia, England, Germany and Canada.

In addition to his prolific academic trajectory, Fernando was a powerful source of personal inspiration for all those who had the chance to share vibrant discussions on an infinite range of topics with him, either between cups of strong Cuban-style coffee, eating pizza at his place, or in the classroom, considered a privileged human scenario for him, where he was, at the same time, as he used to say, an educator and a psychotherapist. Fernando was able to provoke everyone with his unique ideas and questions, alongside his rigorous and energetic style, displacing cultural common-senses, and passivity (the latter could transport him into despair!). He was regularly inviting us to have face-to-face and honest conversations in which one could not merely stand still. The only possible way to relate with him as an interlocutor was taking an active stance and diving in to moments of unpredictable and heart-moving dialogue. Among friends and students, Fernando was known for being able to say “truths” that no one would dare to say. He used to say proudly and convincingly: “I prefer being sometimes considered rude than a hypocrite, as the majority of people are.”

Students used to say he was not only a psychology teacher and supervisor, but an authentic master of life. I could not agree more. Alongside deep theoretical, epistemological and philosophical argumentations, he was permanently drawing from his rich biography as a raw material for us to reflect upon. So many stories of his beloved country, Cuba, appeared alongside moments in the Soviet Union, in the Angola civil war, and in many other countries he had visited! From classical books and movies to tiny

details of his youngest grandson's development, Fernando was always generating ideas, imagining processes and raising reflections on psychology, education, philosophy and social sciences. They were neither apart from each other in his perspective, nor apart from the complexity of life, culture and society. And further, they were not apart from the responsibility to generate new ideas that could lead us to different forms of relationships with the world and with ourselves.

For me, the way he moved through the experience with cancer is a beautiful example of the kind of human being Fernando was. He fought seven years with his illness, but he managed to live this experience through his "philosophy of life," as he used to say. We used to spend hours talking about this topic. He explained that his cancer should not be considered as a way to death, but a life process. It was not a curse, but an expression of nature that had been generated by his own body. I can still hear his voice: "Dani, cancer is present in me, just as my baldness is. It's part of me. I've never seen my illness as something outside of me." That is why he kept his work, projects and dreams until his last days. For instance, he supervised his undergraduate students through Skype two weeks before he died, and was happy and excited to know, a couple of days before his passing, that his paper had been accepted by *Mind, Culture and Activity* to be published. For me, it is comforting to think that he kept his strength, integrity and enthusiasm until his last breath, and was surrounded by love and affection from his wife and sons. To be honest, I have never met someone with a stronger connection with life. It is not easy at all to find poetry and beauty in the short breaks between chemotherapy and radiotherapy sessions, yet he was able to do this.

The other part of the equation was Fernando's constant search to learn and understand the way that the cancer was behaving. This search, according to him, demanded interpretation and the generation of hypotheses according to singular cases, in a process that is far beyond the medical protocols. He could not trust patterns and rules, but relied upon generative and creative thinking through the process. Actually, Fernando, himself, lived his epistemological, methodological and theoretical texts through his own skin and in his own experiences! In this sense, he never took for granted what doctors used to tell him. He was a permanent and active agent of the search for the best option at a certain moment. Fernando valued good and reflective doctors, but as dialogical interlocutors, not as bastions of technical truths. And he kept four or five doctors at once, "fooling them all," as he used to say laughing out loud. He discussed new papers from international journals with them, new experiments in China, Cuba, in the US, and so forth. Indeed, he was the most impatient patient that a doctor could come across. An interesting aspect of this process is that the doctors themselves learned so much from Fernando that they became his friends. The closest ones were often invited for dinner and to discuss other life topics in between glasses of wine.

I remember one day when his doctor asked him to do a blood test with certain indicators that were important to check the side effects of an immunotherapy he was doing. However, Fernando included other indicators that were actually important for him (not for the doctor). Another physician at the laboratory then asked him: "Won't your doctor be mad at you, as you are asking something different from her?" He immediately answered: "Please, do not forget that you, doctors, are supporting me in my treatment, but the protagonist of my health is no one but myself."

Another remarkable moment happened when Fernando was invited to be one of the keynote speakers at the *4th International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR) Conference*, which took place in Sydney, Australia, in September 2014. As always, he had prepared several topics to present and discuss, which culminated in a published paper (González Rey, 2014). However, a couple of months before the conference, he suffered a serious femur infection as a side effect of his cancer treatment, which were followed by several prosthesis surgeries. He was still at the hospital in Brasilia, with a delicate health condition, when he decided to record his conference at the hospital amphitheatre. His wife and sons organised the session, along with the hospital staff. Relatives, academic colleagues, doctoral, masters and undergraduate students attended this session. It was truly impressive to watch Fernando in a wheelchair, and in painful moment, giving a keynote speech in English, despite being in Brazil with Brazilians, for an hour.<sup>1</sup>

Together with colleagues and friends, José Fernando Patiño Torres and Cristina Madeira Coelho, I travelled to Sydney for the conference and delivered his recorded lecture on a memory stick to the conference staff. His key note speech was located on the last day of the conference, yet, it was the most well-attended one. Interestingly, despite being on the other side of the world, Fernando felt closer to the people in the room than the other keynote speakers who were actually there.

Fernando told me a couple of times that he wanted to write a biography, not only for personal reasons, but because he felt that his biography would articulate historical moments, cultures and processes that seldom appear together. Nevertheless, he was too concerned with discussions on subjectivity, cultural-historical psychology, epistemology and qualitative research to spend his time writing about his own life. So, I suggested, in 2017, a biographical project based on several sessions of dialogue between the two of us. He agreed and we started straight away. After two years and over 20 hours of conversation, we concluded the sessions last January and could celebrate it together.

Unfortunately, Fernando is not able to give further ideas for the final version of the book, which is still in process. However, I am pleased and grateful to know that so many people will get to know and to learn from his fascinating life trajectory.

In our last session of dialogue for the project, in January 31, 2019, he said:

Today, I have many projects, because paradoxically I have an intellectual lucidity like never before. But we must get out of our anthropocentrism of thinking that we are the center of the world. No, we are not. I believe I have lived a good, productive and happy life with a happy family, full of experiences of all kinds. I had a life that was so intense, that sometimes a person who lives 90 years does not have. I could write a book of my life like the one Neruda wrote: “*Confieso que he vivido*” (I confess I have lived). Then, when death comes, as it must, I would write I am privileged to have reached the age of 70 like this.

From his own theoretical perspective, Fernando was definitely a subject of his own life. However, through the new paths of subjectivation he opened, he was able to generate social and relational possibilities that changed the life of many other individuals and social groups too. Fernando was brave to face and overcome social, cultural, political and individual boundaries, but was generous enough to favour others to develop with him in this journey.

Thank you, Fernando, *mi viejuco cubano*, for much more than I could ever say or write. The world is sadder without your noisy laughter, and without your energetic arguments that always subverted normalising truths and fashionable thoughts. Your friends truly miss the strong slaps you used to offer on our backs every time you finished a joke. However, few human beings finish their journey on this planet leaving such a lively, vibrant life and academic legacy behind. Your heartfelt life legacy will be most deeply inscribed on those who had the opportunity to receive your touch, yet many others will benefit from your scholarship as well. Few human beings have lived a more generous life; it is likely that few will be as able to keep themselves as alive as you do now.

## Note

1. Fernando's keynote speech at the 4<sup>th</sup> International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR) Conference is available in the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVpl6eg4hbE&t=87s>.

## Disclosure statement

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