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Inside processes: Transitory understandings, action guiding anticipations, and witness thinking*

John Shotter

To talk and to think, not *about* process, but *in relation to it*, is not easy. Many brilliant writers and thinkers in the recent past have helped us to think about process *from the outside*, about processes that we merely observe as happening ‘over there’, but few have helped us to think in terms of our own, spontaneously responsive involvement in ongoing processes *from the inside*. Yet practitioners need a style of thought and talk that allows them uniquely to affect the flow of processes from within their own unique living involvements with them. Crucially, I will argue, this kind of responsive action and understanding only becomes available to us in our relations with living forms if we enter into dialogically-structured relations with them. It remains utterly unavailable to us as external observers. I will call this kind of thinking, thinking-from-within or “witness-thinking,” to contrast it with the “aboutness-thinking” that is more familiar to us. In articulating its nature, I will draw on the work of Bakhtin and Wittgenstein, along with Vygotsky, Merleau-Ponty, and Polanyi. Central to it and quite unavailable to us in aboutness-thinking, is our *subsidiary awareness* (Polanyi, 1958) of certain “action guiding anticipations” and “transitory understandings” that become available to us within any ongoing processes in which we happen to be engaged, such that we can always have an anticipatory sense of at least the style or the grammar of what next might occur.

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“Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially. We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality, and, as these are characteristic of the reality, we have only to string them on a becoming, abstract, uniform and invisible, situated at the back of the apparatus of knowledge, in order to imitate what there is that is characteristic in this becoming itself...Whether we would think becoming, or express it, or even perceive it, we hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us” (Bergson 1911, 322-323).

“It seems then that, parallel to this physics, a second kind of knowledge ought to have grown up, which could have retained what physics allowed to escape... This second kind of knowledge would have set the cinematographical method aside. It would have called upon the mind to renounce its most cherished habits... it is the flow of time, it is the very flux of the real that we should be trying to follow ... by accustoming [the mind] to install itself within the moving, but by developing also another faculty, complementary to the intellect, we may open a perspective on the other half of the real... a *life* of the real” (Bergson 1911, 343-344).

Currently, there is much discussion of the concept of *process* (Chia 2002, 2003; Chia/Tsoukas 2002, 2003). Indeed, “Theorizing Process in Organizational Research” was the focal topic in a recent European Organization Studies Summer Workshop¹. There was, however, an important caveat in the original call for papers for that Workshop: all the offered attempts to theorize process should keep in mind the aim of *rethinking appropriate styles of empirical research*. On the face of it, from a rational point of view, this would seem to be both a highly desirable aim as well as a quite unexceptional one. What else could possibly be one’s goal in organizational research? Prior to our inquiries into a something, we need to know *what* that something *is*, and

¹ The theme of the First Organization Studies Summer Workshop was “On Theorizing Process in Organizational Research,” 12th-13th June 2005, in Santorini, Greece.

surely, that is best accomplished by the systematic formulation of an explanatory theory as to its nature.

Losing the phenomena

Below, however, I want to discuss some major difficulties with the adoption of this approach in this instance, when we are concerned with processes within which we ourselves are, or at least can be, embedded as practitioners. For, as I see it, as (action) researchers, as co-practitioners along with those with whom we are conducting our inquiries, our task is to develop styles of thought and talk that allow those primarily involved in the particular processes in question, to uniquely affect the flow of those processes from within their own unique living involvements with them. Thus, to pose the difficulty we face as that of *theorizing process in relation to empirical inquiry*, may be wholly misleading: it can lead us into beginning our inquiries with a quite inappropriate orientation toward our own overall aims. For, if as action researchers we are interested in adopting a more collaborative or participatory approach in our inquiries, it can lead us instead to seek our own wilful, manipulative, and individualistic control over the processes in question – for this, after all, is the practical aim of scientific investigations (see Shotter 1999). But more than this, it can mislead us in our inquiries to arriving on the scene too late and to looking in the wrong direction with the wrong attitude in mind: *too late*, because we take the ‘basic elements’ in terms of which we must work and conduct our arguments to be already fixed in existence; *in the wrong direction*, because we look backward toward supposed already existing actualities, rather than forward toward possibilities; and *with the wrong attitude*, because we seek a static picture, a theoretical representation, of a phenomenon, rather than a living sense of it as an active agency in our lives. In short, in Garfinkel’s (2002, 264-267) terms, we “lose the phenomena.”

We lose the phenomena because mainstream theory-driven research portrays practitioners as people who simply choose and reflect (or reflect and choose) in the performance of their actions. It fails to portray them as participants already caught up in a ceaselessly ongoing process who – in the face of the constraints and limited resources it affords them, as well as the responses

it ‘calls for’ from them – must produce *from within* that ongoing process, both recognizable and accountable utterances and actions, recognizable sounds and movements. In moving on inside a world that is making them whilst they are making it, they are not able to reflect on that world as a finished object: they know *what* they are doing, i.e., they can account for it to others if challenged; they know *why* they are doing it, i.e., they have a reason for it; but what they still don’t yet know, is *what* their doing *has done* – it may in the end all turn out badly. An overall evaluation of the outcome of their actions is possible only on their final completion (whenever that may be). Theory-driven research, however, approaches the process of people acting as a sequence of already completed actions, and reflects back on them with the aim of mastering their rational reproduction. In so doing, their sequential unfolding is represented as a sequence of static, well-defined, already existing states or positions, occurring juxtaposed with each other like beads on a string (with time being seen as a fourth dimension of space). It fails to account for the myriad situated details to which an actor must attend and respond in their *struggles* to creatively produce their actions in the first place – and I will use the word ‘struggle’ from now on to indicate the overcoming of a unique difficulty for a first-time.

Cunliffe (1997) reports the comments of Steve, the Vice-President of a New England power company in America, when being interviewed about the multidimensional complexities and uncertainties of his job:

Steve: “The worst part of my job is that every decision I make is 20-20 hindsighted by everybody: by the Utilities Commission and by my supervisors. December of ‘89 was my worst nightmare. We began on Thanksgiving day with 40 consecutive days of the coldest temperature ever recorded. We were having a new pipeline installed that was scheduled to be completed November 1st – with the new supply coming in – it didn’t get completed until December 18th. I had planned to go out and use other supply that was running through. Our propane supply ship coming into XXX [our dock here] got hit with a hundred foot sea on December 22nd – was scheduled to be in on the 25th coming over from Algeria. It took a huge crack in the bow and two people got killed. I didn’t anticipate that. Then by December 22nd I was a certifiable genius – I was the only one in a six State Region with any propane left. I got a call at home from Governor YYY at 8:30 at night to tell me I’d be in his office at 9:00 the next morn-

ing. I was either going to give him 100,000 gallons of my propane or he was going to take 500,000 gallons – ‘Have a nice night! See you in the morning!’ We had to call the Attorneys, I was up all night: ‘Could he do that?’ – ‘Yes’. ... Then it was the warmest January ever recorded, the warmest February ever recorded then we went from not enough to too much. I sat on the witness stand (at the Utilities Commission who wanted to disallow \$1,000,000 from the Company) for twenty two and a half days explaining every decision I made.”

Here, then, in dealing with the kind of circumstances Steve describes, there is nothing comparable to the solution of a logical or mathematical problem, in which we have to cudgel our brains to devise ways of working out something unknown from what we already know about the situation in question. Problems of that kind can be solved by ‘calculation’ because they are already well defined as such. “Problem solving” of this kind entails the application of what Schön (1983) calls a “technical rationality.” But, as Steve’s case makes clear, involved as an aspect of people’s struggles to creatively produce their actions in the first place, is what Schön (1983) calls “problem-setting,” which is: “the process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen... Problem-setting is a process in which, interactively, we *name* the things to which we will attend and *frame* the context in which we will attend to them” (40). It is in situations of practice that “problem setting” becomes so crucially important, because, as Schön pointed out, “the situations of practice are not problems to be solved but problematic situations characterized by uncertainty, disorder, and indeterminacy” (15-16). In other words, as we pointed out above, what we face in practice is not a problem presenting itself as something already well-defined in relation to the kind of technical ingenuity required for their solution, but a situation in which a *struggle* to realize an effective outcome in the face of often unpropitious circumstances is required. We call it a struggle rather than problem-solving because, as we have seen, in expressing each sequential movement in an ongoing course of action, we have to *struggle* with, i.e., *navigate* within, an often overwhelming sea of unique details, and to take all of these somehow into account in the unique course of action we actually take. As Bakhtin (1993) puts it: “The performed act concentrates, correlates, and resolves within a unitary and unique and, this time, *final context* both the

sense and the fact, the universal and the individual, the real and the ideal, for everything enters into the composition of its answerable motivation. The performed act constitutes a going out *once and for all* from within possibility as such into *what is once-occurrent*" (28-29). We just do in the circumstances what, given all our accumulated experience, seems to be for the best at that moment – as Steve remarks, "the worst part of my job is that every decision I make is 20-20 hindsighted by everybody..."

Wittgenstein (1953) captures the ease with which we can mislead ourselves into adopting such inappropriate ways of thinking about and looking at the phenomena around us, and within us, in our inquiries – so that a first-time *creative* process gets respecified as a second-time *rational decision making* process – in the following remark: "How does the philosophical problem about mental processes and states... arise.? – The first step is the one that altogether escapes notice. We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometime perhaps we shall know more about them – we think. *But that is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter.* For we have a definite concept of what it means to learn to know a process better. (The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent.) – And now the analogy which was to make us understand our thoughts falls to pieces. So we have to deny the yet uncomprehended process in the yet unexplored medium. And now it looks as if we had denied mental processes. And naturally we don't want to deny them" (no. 308, my emphasis).

So, if we want to "attach ourselves to the inner becoming of things," as Bergson (1911, 322) suggests we should, if we want to gain a more direct apprehension of the passing reality within which we have and live our lives, what can we do? As I see it, there is an important distinction to be made between what, loosely, we might call *the relation* of useful *conversational* talk to the conduct and development of organizational processes, and the attempt to formulate rigorous (scientific) *theories* appropriate to these tasks. Indeed, I want to go so far as to argue for the inappropriateness of strict, systematic theories and special terminology in attempts to understand and to produce change in organizations, and for the appropriateness of everyday conversational talk (Shotter/Cunliffe 2002). For, as I see it, such theoretical talk works

to *un-relate* us to the very events occurring around us that – if we were to *re-relate* ourselves appropriately to them – could in fact provide us with the “action guiding” sensibility we require if we are to ‘go on’ to respond to such events appropriately. But clearly, for everyday conversational talk to be useful in this way, it must be related in certain crucial ways to the processes within which it can exert its influence. It is the nature of these special relations, and how they have in fact been already illuminated by a whole galaxy of concerned writers, that I want to explore further below.

Talk that can influence our ‘ways of seeing’

Whilst there are quite a number of writers oriented toward helping us think *about* the inner movements occurring in processes “from the outside,” so to speak, that is, about the inner movements occurring in processes that we can observe as happening *over there* – and here I have in mind the brilliant work of such writers and thinkers in the recent past as William James, Henri Bergson, and Gregory Bateson among many others – there is another set of writers who, I think, can more immediately help us in gaining an understanding “from within” those processes in which we are, or can be, involved, and which, because of our involvement, we can affect. And here I have in mind, and will be drawing on the work of such writers as Bakhtin and Wittgenstein, along with Vygotsky, Merleau-Ponty, and Polanyi.

They can, I think, be of a more immediate help to us, because they have realized that there are other ways of seeing, understanding, thinking, and acting that become available to us in our relations with living forms, if we can enter into responsive, *dynamic or dialogical relations* with them – a *relational-responsive* way of understanding that is quite different in kind from the *referential-representational* form we are used to in our more intellectual dealings with our surroundings. Elsewhere (Shotter 1993a, 1993b), I have called this kind of understanding and thinking, an understanding-from-within, but here I will call it simply, *witness-thinking*. It is a kind of momentary knowledge that one can only have *from within* one’s active, ongoing relations with the others and othernesses in one’s surroundings, and which disappears as soon as one’s active involvements with them cease.

In Polanyi's (1958) terms, in witness-thinking, we might say that instead of thinking with a *focal awareness* of the end point of a process in mind, we think along with a *subsidiary awareness* of certain felt experiences as they occur to us from within our engaged (or responsive) involvement in a particular unfolding process, and that these *responsive inner feelings* play a crucial role in guiding our actions – or, as I will put it from now on, we experience ourselves in our engaged or involved activities as being issued with “acting guiding calls or advisories.” As is well-known, Polanyi (1958) introduced his notion of “tacit knowledge” as exerting an action guiding function thus: “When we use a hammer to drive a nail, we attend to both nail and hammer, but in a *different way*... When we bring down the hammer we do not feel that its handle has struck our palm but that its head has struck the nail. Yet in a sense we are certainly alert to the feelings in our palm and the fingers that hold the hammer. They guide us in handling it effectively, and the degree of attention that we give to the nail is given to the same extent but in a different way to these feelings... They are not watched in themselves: we watch something else while keeping intensely aware of them. I have a *subsidiary awareness* of the feeling in the palm of my hand which is merged into my *focal awareness* of my driving in the nail” (55). To repeat, the feelings of which we are subsidiarily aware in our palm and fingers are required to guide us in our handling of the hammer effectively; it is impossible to hammer skillfully with anaesthetized hands.

But let me also note, it is only those of us who have had a great deal of hammering experience – my own early background was in carpentry and engineering – who will find Polanyi's written account capable of re-arousing such feelings in them, capable of *reminding* them of the nature and role of such subsidiary awarenesses. I make this comment here, as later I want to discuss the relevance of Wittgenstein's (1953) use of an everyday, conversational kind of language to *remind*² us of things that are “already in plain view” (no. 89) in our interactions with the others and othernesses around us,

² “Something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it, is something that we need to remind ourselves of. (And it is obviously something of which for some reason it is difficult to remind oneself.)” (Wittgenstein, 1953, no. 89).

things which we already 'know' in our practical doings, but which we cannot easily give an account of when asked. For, as I indicted above, there is a certain kind of conversational talk that can be a powerful help to us in further refining and developing our practices, in reflecting back to us at crucial moments, important aspects of our practices from within our own conduct of them.

In turning then to events occurring between us, to our everyday use of language, which is much more familiar to all of us than (perhaps) hammering nails, we find that Bakhtin (1986) nicely captures some aspects of the special nature of what I called above witness-knowing, when he suggests that: "All real and integral understanding is actively responsive... And the speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding. He does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak, only duplicates his or her own idea in someone else's mind. Rather, he expects response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth..." (69). In other words, we do not have to wait for speakers to complete their utterances before we can understand their speech sufficiently to respond to it in practice. For present to us in our spontaneous bodily responsiveness to their voicing of their utterances as they unfold, are *action guiding anticipatory understandings* of what they might possibly say next. For again, as Bakhtin (1986) notes: "The utterance is related not only to preceding, but also to subsequent links in the chain of speech communication... [F]rom the very beginning, the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created... From the very beginning, the speaker expects a response from them, an active responsive understanding. The entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering this response" (94). And all these *relationally-responsive*, "transitory understandings" happen spontaneously,³ as a result no doubt of the

³ But the utterances in question are all always fashioned in a responsive relation to local circumstances, they are not thus merely mechanical repetitions of previous utterances. Thus, as Voloshinov (1984) puts it: "The task of understanding does not basically amount to recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding it in a particular, concrete context, to understanding its meaning in a particular utterance, i.e., it amounts to understanding its novelty and not to recognizing its identity" (68). It is not its precise repeatability that is important but its "specific variability" (69). It is this that allows us to move on from what a speaker's words mean, to what the speaker means by using them.

countless hours of training we have had in our prior involvements in our culture.⁴ We do not have to ‘work them out’, self-consciously and deliberately.

To see the relevance of Bakhtin’s remarks above to the special nature of witness-knowing, consider a speaker asking us the following complex question: “What crucial features of a dynamic, interactive process are lost in attempting to represent such a process as a sequence of static configurations of separate parts joined to each other as a sequence in terms of the laws of motion of such parts?” In answering any such question, we must continually think *with* the question’s voice in mind to guide us in our attempts to formulate (to write out) an answer to it; and of course, as soon as we begin the process of producing an answer, we must also think *with* what we have already written in mind as well, to guide our further thinking as to what an appropriate answer requires. We repeatedly *voice* the question to ourselves in the hope of it *calling* new responses from us. It is precisely these unique action guiding anticipatory understandings arising out of our acting *with* a question in mind – which arise, in fact, in our voicing the question again to ourselves in our “inner speech” (Vygotsky 1986) – that are lost when our unique, once-off, creative responses to the ‘questions’ posed to us by the others and othernesses in our surroundings are refashioned as a wilfully planned de-contextualized actions. What originally occurred as a unique answer to a unique question coming to us from our surroundings, is re-composed into an action that can be executed by any isolated individual, anywhere, at anytime.

But, as I indicated above, if we are to respond appropriately to the unique events occurring around us, we need to *re-relate* ourselves to them in such a way that they arouse in us the uniquely appropriate “transitory understandings” (that give us a sense of ‘where we stand’) and “action guiding anticipations” (that give us a sense of ‘where we might go next’) that can enable us to ‘go on’ to respond to them appropriately. This may seem to suggest that all theoretical writings should now be seen as useless to us a practitioners. But this, I think, is not so. It is a matter of how we relate or orient ourselves toward their utterances *when they are talking of human communication and*

⁴ “Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (Vygotsky 1978, 88).

other human practices familiar to us: Instead of attending to what theorists are supposedly talking *about*, what they are attempting to picture or represent as an essential state of affairs ‘over there’, by responding to and thinking *with* the relationally-responsive meanings of their utterances in mind, as “reminders,” we can perhaps use them as ‘guides’ in helping us judge how best, practically, to ‘go on’ in relation to the unique events currently occurring around us. For it is their utterances *in the course of their speaking* (when, that is, they are speaking of situations with which we are all familiar) that can guide us in acting effectively. For, if we can keep their *voicing* of their utterances in mind, like the powerful voices of all the others around us who first instructed us in the ways of acting appropriate in our community (Vygotsky 1978, 1986), they can arouse in us the possible action guiding advisories that can give us a sense of how to ‘go on’ in the situations of which they speak in their talk.

As an example of what I mean here, we can take Wittgenstein’s (1953) remark, to do with how, when someone doesn’t ‘get’ what you are trying to teach them, you sometimes simply put another example in front of them: “I wanted to put that picture before him, and his acceptance of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*. (Indian mathematicians: “Look at this.”)” (no. 144). Looking now *with* the action guiding awareness aroused in him by the new example, he now ‘gets it.’ But we are all familiar with teachers saying to us, while watching over our attempts to carry out a skilled practice, “Not like *that* (repeating in exaggerated form our still not quite right attempt), but like *this* (executing the act now with emphatic finesse).” Thus to bring to our attention the crucial differences between our own attempt to ‘get it’, with what a poised or self-possessed ‘getting it’ consists in, where sure a confident ‘getting it’ consists in, as we shall see, a performance that meets a complex multiplicity of intertwined and not wholly articulable criteria.

Cunliffe (2001) gives an example of a rather different kind. In discussing with another Steve, the Vice-President of a company facing all kinds of changes due to government deregulation of the industry, she quotes his com-

ments on the reluctance of people within the company to deal with these changes:

“**Steve:** Parts of the business aren’t talking about it. The Finance side is... it’s almost like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, they click their heels and they want to go back to Kansas – and you can’t go back. Humpty Dumpty’s off the wall – I’m sorry! (Laughter)”

As Cunliffe comments, this remark not only enabled her to grasp the nature of the internal relations in the organization, its irony also gave her a direct and clear sense of the Finance department’s attitudes.

Thus, given these examples, to the question as to whether there is a form of inquiry, with associated ways of talking and thinking, that can capture the character of such action guiding anticipations, and recreate them when necessary in such a way that they can, so to speak, be ‘carried over’ into new circumstances different from those in which they were originally created, then I think we can answer: there is! Indeed, it will be precisely the inserting, or the *chiasmic intertwining* (see Shotter 2003a), at an appropriate moment of an event that arouses an “action guiding subsidiary awareness” at *that* moment in a practice, that can, I think, lead to a correction, a refining, or an elaboration of the practice in question. Thus it is on inserting events of this kind at appropriate moments into a practice that we need to focus, I suggest, if we are to rethink the styles of empirical research appropriate to our re-visioning of organizational processes.

Living expression

Why have we not been aware of this possibility before? What has prevented us from “attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things” (Bergson 1911, 322)? In Bergson’s view, it is because we have approached our difficulties as *intellectual* difficulties, and it is “the function of the intellect is to preside over actions. Now, in action, it is the result that interests us; the means matter little provided the end is attained... and thence it comes also that only the goal where our activity will rest is pictured explicitly to our mind: the movements constituting the action itself either elude our consciousness or reach it only confusedly” (Bergson 1911, 315). In other words, in being concerned with

practical affairs, we have thought only in terms of visible objects, identifiable positions in space, and sequences of self-contained actions – and this, of course, is essentially the “external world” of the intellect as set out in Descartes’s *Discours* of 1631 (Descartes 1968).

Elsewhere (Shotter 2003b), I have set out the characteristics of the Cartesian world view in detail, so I will not repeat them here. Suffice it here to mention two of its central ideas: One is the idea of the universe (and everything in it) as being made up of an aggregate or configuration of independently existing, unchanging, separate parts, which, at each instant in time, can be found to have taken up one or another configuration according to an now absent God’s externally imposed laws of motion. The other is the idea that inquiries based in this *divide and rule* approach, will enable us to put the things in nature “to all the uses for which they are appropriate, and thereby make ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature” (78). And clearly, it is a view of the world around us that has enabled us to exploit it extensively to our own ends. But, as Milic Capek (1961) remarks with regard to the classical world view: “When we speak of the classical *picture* of physical reality, we are indicating by the very choice of the word its most significant character: its *pictorial* nature” (3). And it is the action guiding advisories implicit in *this* Cartesian *discourse* (Foucault 1969) that is constitutive of the current mainstream consensus as to what proper research *is*.

Indeed, regarding his own difficulties in this respect, Wittgenstein (1953) remarks: “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (no. 115). In other words, because the urges and compulsions, the inclinations and temptations, the anticipations and expectations are implicit in our ordinary everyday talk of practical things, they are extremely difficult to overcome. They cannot be “solved” as intellectual problems. As Wittgenstein (1980) also notes: “What makes a subject hard to understand – if it’s something significant and important – is not that before you can understand it you need to be specially trained in abstruse matters, but the contrast between understanding the subject and what most people *want* to see. Because of this the very things which are most obvious may become the hardest of all to understand. What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than

with the intellect” (Wittgenstein 1980, 17). So, although we often think that our problems can be solved by doing yet more research, an important set of problems are not of that kind at all: they are *orientational* problems, problems of the will, to do both with how we *relate* ourselves to events occurring in our surroundings, and with our *relations* to our own responses to them.

In other words, it is not because we lack knowledge, data, or information that we fail to attach ourselves to the inner becoming of things; it is because we approach them with a whole set of inappropriate, taken for granted *intellectual* expectations and anticipations in mind (of which we are often unaware, and remain unaware). As a result, we often ignore something that in fact is very obvious to us indeed. We ignore the very special nature of living *expression*⁵, and we fail to understand what it is that makes it very different from the mere locomotive movement of things and objects in space, that we describe in terms of a collection of independent particles taking up different positions in space at different instants in time. Let me make eight points:

First, rather than simply being re-arrangements or re-configurations of separately existing parts, which at each instant in time take up a new configuration (according to pre-existing laws or principles), *expressive movements* are the movements of indivisible, dynamic, self-structurizing, unitary, *living wholes*, each one utterly unique in and to itself.

Thus next, besides their moving around in space, living wholes as such can also be sensed as moving *within themselves*. Such expressive movements can be sensed as occurring through time, even if the bodies of the relevant living beings stay steadfastly fixed in a particular location in space – they breathe, they make noises, they wave their limbs about, and so on.

Thirdly, in so doing, they seem to display both short-term expressive ‘inner’ movements – smiles, frowns, gestures, vocalizations, etc. – the expressions of a ‘thou’, i.e., of their own living identity, and more long term ‘inner’ movements, i.e., of their aging. Indeed, all such living wholes endure through a whole continuous, sequential life process: A process that begins with their initial *conception* (in a two-being interaction); that leads to their *birth* (as an

⁵ The power of Bakhtin’s (1981, 1983, 1984, 1991) work is a testament to our awakening attention to this sphere of spontaneously responsive activity.

individual being); then their *growth to maturity* (as an autonomous being); and then their *death*.

So fourthly, while dead assemblages can be constructed piece by piece from objective parts – that is, from parts that retain their character irrespective of whether they are a part of the assemblage or not – living, indivisible wholes cannot. On the contrary, they grow. And in the course of exchanges with their surroundings, they transform themselves, internally, from simple individuals into richly structured ones. In this growth, their ‘parts’ are not only a constant state of change⁶, but they owe their very existence both to their relations to each other and to their relations to themselves at some earlier point in time. Thus the *history* of their structural transformations in time is of more consequence than the logic of their momentary structure(s) in space.

Thus fifthly, there is not only a kind of *developmental continuity* involved in the unfolding of all living activities, but all living entities also imply their surroundings, so to speak; in their very nature, they come into existence ready to *grow into* their own appropriate environment, or *Umwelt* (von Uexkull 1957). There is thus a distinctive ‘inner dynamic’ to living wholes not manifested in dead, mechanical assemblages, such that the earlier phases of the activity are indicative of at least the *style* of what is to come later – we can thus respond to their activities in an *anticipatory* fashion.

Thus sixthly, in always giving rise to what we might call *identity preserving* changes, they and their ‘parts’ are always ‘on the way’ to becoming more than they already are. This is why their special, living nature cannot be captured in a timeless, ‘everything-present-together’, spatial structure or a single order of logical connectedness (systematic theories won’t do it!).

And seventhly, when two or more such forms of life ‘rub together’, so to speak, in their *meetings*, they always create a third or a collective form of life a) in which they all sense themselves *participating*, and b) which has a *life of its own*, with its own ‘voice’ and ‘callings’, and its own way of ‘pointing’ toward the future.

⁶ Hence the need to put the word ‘parts’ in scare quotes. While, perhaps, analytically separable, the ‘parts’ of a living, indivisible whole cannot be substantially separated.

And finally, eighthly, the meeting together of two slight different, but not too different, forms of life, or processes, has a *chiasmic*, or complexly intertwined quality to it – it is the optic *chiasma* in binocular vision which creates the ‘relational dimension’ of depth; the two slightly different views from the two eyes are chiasmically related, i.e., dynamically intertwined (Bateson 1979; Merleau-Ponty 1968).

It is no wonder that in commenting on the nature of living movement as a continuously flowing *process*, Bergson (1911) suggested that “... there is *more* in a movement than in the successive positions attributed to the moving object, *more* in a becoming than in the forms passed through in turn, *more* in the evolution of form than the forms assumed one after another. Philosophy can therefore derive terms of the second kind from those of the first, but not the first from the second: from the first terms [Bergson’s own *intuitive* form of] speculation must take its start. But the intellect reverses the order of the two groups; and, on this point, ancient philosophy proceeds as the intellect does. It installs itself in the immutable, it posits only Ideas” (333). We can now perhaps get a sense of what is lost when we *install* ourselves in the immutable in order to gain a wholly cognitive/intellectual grasp of the others and othernesses in our surroundings in solely in the interest of mastery.

What is lost in trying to theorize *process* ‘from the outside’

As I have already mentioned, one reason is that I am troubled by the very notion of trying to “theorize” process is that (at least it seems to me) such a term carries with it an enormous amount of implicit and unexamined conceptual baggage (Shotter 1999). Besides requiring us to *address* the subject(s) of our inquiries as if we ourselves are disembodied, disinterested creatures able to adopt a God’s eye view (Haraway 1991) – and to treat our subjects as if they were not subjects at all but objects – we also find ourselves committed to searching for something *radically hidden*, for something that can only be arrived at as an “interpretation,” as a “reading,” or as a “representation,” a *something* that has become so utterly unavailable to us just as a result of our cutting ourselves off from our access to it ‘in’ the events that are unfolding around us (Shotter 2000). In short, “theorizing” leads us into thinking that we

control our actions solely through our systematic thoughts, and to cut ourselves off from the transitory understandings provided to us in being spontaneously responsive to the embodied aspects of people's *expressions*.

Cunliffe (1997) comments on the persuasive skills managers have to exert and on the transitory understandings they make use of in being effective in their persuading. Vince, President of a small manufacturing company explains his approach in trying to get Sales staff to realize that, although commitment to the customer is important, certain margins have to be observed if the overall health of the company is to be maintained:

“**Vince:** I realize it's a delicate balance and so we've got Sales people working closely with operations people.... we had our first Sales meeting this year and we brought in all the Sales reps. From across the country ... and we made a presentation when I was delivering the message – I looked for body language and responses because you learn that in interaction with people there are things you can pick up on to sell your ideas to them.”

But, as I have already suggested, we do not understand people's expressions intellectually, in a referential-representational manner; we understand them bodily in a relationally-responsive manner. It is a kind of *historical* or *gestural* understanding which primarily takes their temporal 'movement' into account. Rather than an instantaneous 'getting the picture', it arouses within us an unfolding inner movement that occurs over time, and which – like a piece of music – has a unique temporal 'shape' or 'identity' to it that points us toward a *future* yet to come that has a particular *style* to it.

It is our transitory sense of this 'future indicating shape' that is *lost* in our adoption of the Cartesian-Cinematographical (C-C), pictorial way of relating ourselves to our surroundings (Bergson 1911). For strangely, an important aspect of their 'shape' that is lost to us, is their open, unfinished nature that 'points' us, so to speak, toward their 'horizons'. Describing our surroundings solely in terms of spatial (or pictorial) configurations (mis)leads us into forgetting, not only the essential differences between dead assemblages of externally related parts, but also the essential difference between, in Bergson's (1911) terms, *changes of succession*, i.e., the continuous emergence into being of a living unity, and *changes of juxtaposition*, i.e., the mere changes of

standing side-by-side, such pictorial representations imply. And this then leads us on, only too easily, into reducing the differences between past, present, and future merely to *differences of position*, with ‘past’ events being thought of as lying to the left of a point representing the ‘present’, with ‘future’ events to the right. In other words, the irreversible flow of time is forgotten, and we forget that a *successive* or *expressive* movement has continually, in each of its successive moments, to *struggle* to come into existence – for, at each moment of its realization, it is, so to speak, a matter of navigating in an often unpropitious and often overwhelming sea of other possibilities, to all of which it must be *interrelated* in its own unique realization⁷.

Indeed, even more is lost or forgotten. For, not only are *unique, irreversible* changes, with their own *unique character*, taking place, but novel changes of an inevitably *creative*, only once occurrent kind are occurring; they cannot not occur – this is what is implied in the very notion of the irreversible flow of time, i.e., in Bergson’s (1911) notion of “duration” (see note 3).

But it is not just our anticipations of *that which has not yet occurred*, that we lose in C-C accounts of change, we also lose our sense of other people (and things) as having an ‘inner life’ of their own! Bergson (1911) puts it thus:

“Such is the contrivance of the cinematograph. And such is also that of our knowledge. Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially” (322).

It is the “inner becoming” of indivisible things, including our surrounding circumstances, that is lost to us. For, as I indicated above, in C-C accounts, all movement is treated merely as observed differences in position (to and from positions that are in fact already in existence). As Bergson (1911) puts it, this because we try to re-compose living movement from a sequence of “possible immobilities” (327).⁸ And after our many years of training in our

⁷ Hence the need to put the word ‘parts’ in scare quotes. While, perhaps, analytically separable, the ‘parts’ of a living, indivisible whole cannot be substantially separated.

⁸ To see all movement as merely observed differences in position, is to see people’s movements as tracing out a line or trajectory through a sequence of points. In seeing it thus, we have, so to speak, to “stay outside” the movement. But, as Bergson (1911)

everyday world of practical activities, in which so much of our talk is oriented towards dealing with visibly describable and manually tangible entities existing in a ‘picturable’ world, it is terribly difficult for us to undo (*deconstruct*) these habits of thought within ourselves.

Gaining ongoing understandings of how to go on

Yet, I want to claim, there is a way, and it is a way that does not entail our inventing a whole set of new methods *de novo*. Indeed, as Wittgenstein (1953) puts it, it is not a matter of “hunt[ing] out new facts... [or of] seek[ing] to learn something *new*.. We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view... Something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it” (no. 89). For example, if I were now to ask you (as a reader of this article) a question – say, “What so far seems to be the relation between Shotter’s approach here, and Bergson’s account of creative evolution?” – you could all make a good shot at giving an answer. But if I then asked: “What seemed to be involved, what movements of thought, so to speak, did you undertake in formulating your answer?” – that would be a much more difficult question to answer. About such a circumstance, in which we perform a complex action fairly effortlessly (in which in Polanyi’s (1967, 8) phrase, we show that we “know more than [we] can tell”), Wittgenstein (1953) suggests that we must start by “reminding” ourselves of what it is that we already know – where that something of which we need to *remind* ourselves, is “obviously something of which for some reason it is difficult to remind oneself” (no. 89).

It is *with* Wittgenstein’s (1953) voicing of these remarks in mind, that I want to begin to claim, that there is, “parallel to... physics, a second kind of knowledge,” which (to rephrase Bergson a little) *does retain* what physics has allowed to escape, that is, a second kind of knowledge that sets the cine-

puts it: “... the possibility of applying the movement to the line traversed exists only for an observer who, keeping outside the movement and seeing at every instant the possibility of a stop, tries to reconstruct the real movement with these possible immobilities. The absurdity vanishes as soon as we adopt by thought the continuity of the real movement, a continuity of which every one of us is conscious whenever he lifts an arm or advances a step” (327).

matographical method aside and does actually follow the very flux of the real by installing itself *within* the *life*, within the *living movement* of the real (Bergson 1911, 343-344). In adopting it, instead of thinking *about* changes in a living, indivisible state of affairs *from the outside* in terms of them going through a sequence of separate immobile spatial configurations, we can begin to think in accord *with* their changing nature *from within* our living relations with them. For, if we can allow ourselves to be spontaneously responsive to the temporal unfolding of their expressive movements, then we can find that same unfolding movement within our own bodily-felt experience.

But we can only find that same unfolding movement within our own bodily-felt experience if we are prepared to enter into, what I will call, a *living* relation with the others and othernesses around us. And action guiding sense of an other's or otherness's *inner life* can become available to us if we enter into an embodied, spontaneously responsive relation with them, a relation in which we are continuously responsive (in a reciprocally expressive manner) to their expressions, their 'inner' movements as they unfold in time.

Following Bakhtin (1984), we call these two-way relations, in which our expressive-responsive activities are spontaneously intertwined or interwoven with those of the others with whom we are engaged or involved, *dialogically-structured relations* – to contrast them with monological forms of relation. For: "Monologue is finalized and deaf to other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any *decisive* force" (293). Whereas: "The single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life is the *open-ended dialogue*... To live means to participate in dialogue" to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds" (293).

In the recent past (and still amongst many cognitive scientists), the main function of language is thought to be that of conveying our thoughts to another person in the form of a "mental representation," a *picture* as it were. And, to *understand* the other person's utterance, we must 'get the picture'! Hence, we study sentence *forms* to try to understand how they manage to *represent* their *content*. Bakhtin's (1986) approach could not be more different. Rather than seeking meaning in terms of *patterns of already spoken*

words, i.e., in what is *said*, he seeks it in our very *words in their speaking*, i.e., in our embodied uttering of them, as we utter them.

Above, I have characterized these two forms of understanding, of the saying and of what is said, as being of a *relationally-responsive* (witness) or *representational-referential* (aboutness) kind, but what I want to emphasize here, is that crucial amongst the many other distinctions between these two forms of understanding, is the orientation of relationally-responsive, or witness-talk, *toward the future*. Let me underline this with another of Bakhtin's (1981) remarks:

“The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word; it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by *that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word*. Such is the situation of any living dialogue” (280, my emphasis).

This, then, as I now see it, is the major feature shift in focus in action research that we need: *1) to shift our attention away from the deliberate thought and actions of individuals (especially those of theorists), and turn toward events happening spontaneously out in the world between us and the others and othernesses around us*⁹; and further, *2) to attend to those events as aspects or as embedded in larger indivisible wholes within which we ourselves are also embedded*.

Where our goal in doing this is, so to speak, *re-relate* ourselves intellectually to the actual events that are spontaneously influencing the shape of our actions, to re-relate ourselves in fact to the events that can issue us with the very “action guiding calls” we need if we are to ‘go on’ appropriately in response to them (Shotter 2003b). But this can only be done if, in Bakhtin's (1984) terms, we enter into dialogically-structured relations with the others and othernesses around us, and literally treat them as beings ‘who’ can issue such ‘calls’ to us.

⁹ Here, we can follow Gadamer (1975, xvi; 2000, xxviii), who states: “My real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing.”

Barriers to change: local and official rationalities

Here, then, we have a clear tension between our ordinary, everyday situations of decision-making in practice, characterized by struggles in the face of uncertainty, disorder, and indeterminacy (Schön), and our representations of them in mainstream theory-driven research, in which we assume that when people act, they do so by making decisions simply in the face of the objective conditions confronting them, and that they progressively correct their decisions and their actions accordingly as additional information turns up, i.e., they problem-solve. What is the source of this tension? And how might it be overcome? These questions are important, for clearly, the need to see ourselves as not only rational, but as able to be called to account for the decisions we make, “stands in the way” (Wittgenstein 1953, no. 305) of our seeing this situation “as it is.”

And as we have seen, as participants in already ceaselessly ongoing processes, practitioners *can only* act in relation to the constraints and limited resources locally afforded them within such processes, as well as the responses they ‘call for’ from them. In so doing, they often act like, say, tournament tennis players,¹⁰ doing the best they can given the exigencies of their local circumstances. In other words, they hardly make any self-consciously deliberated decisions at all! They simply act spontaneously, in terms of their embodied judgment incorporated after years of experience. Thus, in going on inside a world that is still making them whilst they are still making it, they are not able to reflect on that world as a finished object: as a consequence, people can in fact have no reflective understanding of the local conditions that de-

¹⁰ Classically, Bartlett (1932) in discussing his idea of the ‘schema’, the “active organization of past reactions... which must always be supposed as operating in well-adapted organic response” (201), took making a stroke in a quick game of tennis as an example: “How I make the stroke depends on the relating of certain new experiences, most of them visual, to other immediately preceding visual experiences and to my posture, or balance of postures, at the moment. The latter, the balance of postures, is a result of a whole series of earlier movements, in which the last movement before the stroke is played has a predominant function. When I make the stroke I do not, as matter of fact, produce something absolutely new, and I never merely repeat something old. The stroke is literally manufactured out of the living visual and postural ‘schemata’ of the moment and their interrelations. I may say, I may think that I reproduce exactly a series of text-book movements, but demonstrably I do not...” (201-202, my emphasis).

terminated their actions at all. They know *what* they are doing, i.e., they can account for it to others if challenged; they know *why* they are doing it, i.e., they have a reason for it; but what they still don't yet know, is *what* their doing *has done* – it may in the end all turn out badly. It can only be seen *as* having resulted from a 'correct decision' after their actions have been taken. The fleeting *joint creations*, the unique, only once-occurrent events involved in their struggles to arrive at a satisfactory outcome, do not and cannot figure in any of the retrospective accounts we give others when they ask us about why we acted as we did. In retrospect, we can only formulate *what we must have done* in order to make our supposed 'decision' a correct decision.

In our everyday affairs, as Mills (1940) and Scott and Lyman (1968) noted, we do not have to account to others for *each and everyone* of our actions. Only when others are puzzled by our actions and do not know how to coordinate their own actions with our's, do they expect us to tell them of the reasons or motives for our actions, to *account* for them, to justify (or to excuse) ourselves for acting as we did. Indeed, if as a member of a particular society we are to have the right of acting as an autonomous individual, we take on the duty of knowing how to sustain that society's norms in one's conduct (Shotter 1984).¹¹ Thus, it is always in relation to the 'official' norms of one's culture that one must account to others for one's conduct – this may not be very useful instructing others as to how *in fact* one acted in *these local conditions* in the achievement of a joint outcome along with others, but it is crucial in ensuring that one's actions are *related to by others*, as being in accord with societal norms. However, this means that it is often the case that a person defines *retrospectively* the 'decisions' they supposedly made: whereas, in fact, *the outcome occurred before the statement of the 'decisions'*

¹¹ In Shotter (1984) I explore the question: "Rather than individuals, why not take particular interpersonal relationships as the units productive of action in a society: the speaker/listener as a unit; the teacher/pupil; mother/child; master/slave; boss/worker; husband/wife, etc.?" And I suggest: "The answer, I think, lies in the fact that a society, if it is to remain a society, must amongst other things be able to maintain a social order. For that to be possible, the elementary units in that order must be able to detect whether that order has been transgressed or not, and if so, be able to act in some way towards its restitution" (p.148). In other words, our adherence to an 'official' order must always take precedence over our relations to a local order.

*accounting for it.*¹² And they need to do this to give their decision *legitimacy*, i.e., they need to show how what they did *fits in with* the agreed overall aims and values of the organization in which they have a decision making role.

In other words, there is perhaps something unrecognized at work in the very foundations of our forms of intellectual inquiry, something to do with our need to be seen as maintaining our social order.

Garfinkel (1967) provides a now classic account of how jurors make their decisions “while maintaining a healthy respect for the routine features of the social order” (104). He highlights in his account just the tensions and ambiguities we have been highlighting here: that between the decision making methods of everyday life and acting in conformity with the “official juror line” (108). There is not space to go into this study in great detail, but a number of details are worthy of mention here. First, is the fact that jurors were themselves very aware of these tensions, and of the fact that they had retrospectively ‘modified’ their reasons for their judgments. But, “such selective ‘redeliberations’, as ‘solutions’ to the ambiguities in their situations of ‘choice’, were uneasily held and were productive of incongruity. But such discrepancies were privately entertained. Publically, jurors either described their decisions as having been arrived at in conformity with the official line or they preferred to withhold comment” (112). Indeed, “when, during the interviews, their attention was drawn by interviewers to the discrepancies between their ideal accounts and their ‘actual practices’ jurors became anxious. They looked to the interviewer for assurance that the verdict nevertheless had been correct in the judge’s opinion” (113).

In other words, in everyday life, people face two distinct tasks in their actions: (1) the practical, prospective task of realizing an achievement, step-by-step in relation to exacting local conditions, and (2) the ethico-political task of retrospectively accounting to others for the legitimacy of the final outcome of their actions – two tasks that need bear very little relation to each other. As Garfinkel (1967) puts it, after having discussed the tensions at work here: “If the above description is accurate, decision making in daily life would thereby have, as a critical feature, the *decision maker’s task of justifying a course of*

¹² No wonder such talk has no locally useful action guiding force to it.

action” (114). In other words, in our everyday activities, we are much more likely to be preoccupied with the problem of assigning a legitimate history to the *outcomes* of our actions than with trying to attend to the local details relevant to the *process* of their fashioning. As Wittgenstein (1980b) remarks: “The *facts* of human history that throw light on our problem, are difficult for us to find out, for our talk *passes them by*, it is occupied with other things” (vol. I, no. 78).

However, as I see it, it is precisely the function of Wittgenstein’s (1953) “philosophical remarks,”¹³ to give “prominence to distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook” (no. 132). They work as “reminders,” to alert us to pay attention to what is in fact already very familiar to us within our everyday lives, but which we leave nonetheless disregarded – like Garfinkel’s jurors – in the background to our lives together.

Elsewhere (Shotter 1999, 2000, 2003b), I have explored the practical significance of Wittgenstein’s philosophical remarks for action research extensively, and there is not space to repeat that exploration here. But let me nonetheless suggest that this is precisely how we might best *relate* ourselves to a theorist’s utterances *when they are talking of human communication and other human practices familiar to us*: not by making use of his/her generalized representational meaning, i.e., what the theorist is supposedly talking *about*, what they are attempting to picture as an essential state of affairs ‘over there’; but by our responding to and thinking *with* his/her relationally-responsive meanings in mind as guides, as “reminders,” as to how best, practically, to ‘go on’ in relation to the unique events currently occurring around us. For it is their utterances *in the course of their speaking* (when, that is, they are speaking of situations with which we are all familiar) that can guide us in acting effectively. For, if we can keep their *voicing* of their utterances in mind, like the powerful voices of our parents who instructed us in our first ways of acting in our community (Vygotsky 1978, 1986), they can arouse in us the possible action guiding advisories that can give us a sense of how to

¹³ “What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes” (Wittgenstein 1953, no. 415).

‘go on’ in the situations of which they speak in their talk. As a result, we can come to view the world as much through *their words* as through *our own eyes*.

Conclusions

As we have seen above, then, ‘official’, retrospective accounts of an activity fail to account for the myriad situated local details to which an actor must attend and respond in their struggles to creatively produce their actions in the first place. Such *after the fact* accounts, in primarily working to relocate situated actions within the general social order of everyday life, have a justificatory function; they are thus somewhat *beside the point* as aids or guides in orienting practitioners toward attending to crucial details in their own local circumstances. In other words, what cannot be emphasized enough, is that, literally, there is a world of difference between first-time achievements and their second-time reproduction. They occur in two quite different worlds: (1) one in the everyday world of practice, the world of our ceaselessly flowing, just happening, dialogically-structured activities, in which everything occurs in spontaneous (non-deliberate) response to previous occurrences, whereas (2) the other is the modernist, Cartesian world of thoughtful individual agents who act deliberately by putting their intentions into action – the world in which many of us have been trained to think in the more ‘official’ aspects of our careers in formal education.

Palshaugen (2001) notes how difficult it is for us to overcome this tendency to resort to de-contextualized theory-talk: “Practitioners will over and over again find themselves in a situation where they *in practice* perform a ‘theoretical’ kind of discourse, [while] their *theoretical understanding* of themselves as practitioners makes them blind to see this (theoretical) point” (210). Indeed, after groups within an enterprise had spent time on discussions of what problems they faced, and deciding priorities and writing down how each problem might be solved, and who should be responsible and what should be the time limits, they were very surprised when told by Palshaugen and his group that this very practically oriented process, although it “literally made a good show on paper, it was nevertheless a very ‘theoretical’ approach to practical problem-solving” (211). It did not orient them toward, i.e., re-

mind them, of what in their current practices they already knew and did well. Thus, as Palshaugen points out, it is “an important part of our competence as action researchers always to be very attentive to what kind of language game is taking place, since what we in practice do is to *act with words* or *intervene with words*. Thus, we have to be attentive not only to how meaning is *created* by the use of words; we also have to be very attentive to how meanings may be *changed* by using words in another ways – playing language games otherwise” (210). But this is not a matter of the intellect, a matter of gaining still more information or data, it is a matter of one’s way of being in the world, one’s *orientation*, i.e., one ways of relating oneself to the others and othernesses around one in one’s surroundings.¹⁴

Again, Cunliffe (2001) provides a nice example, both of these tensions, and of the very effective way in which Mike, the President of a Health Management Organization in America, ignored them and made use of a more ‘poetic’ form of talk to portray the complexities of a whole set of interconnected circumstances. Cunliffe noted that in his management practice he told a lot of stories:

“**Mike:** and I do a lot of that. For me its probably the most effective way – in dialogue – to tell stories and use analogies and to make pictures...

Ann: ...It can be very persuasive. ...

Mike: Yes, I think comments about it being the weakest form of argument is probably a very modernist view you know. Clearly, when one is trained/educated in the sixties/seventies, you know, right in the teeth of rationalism it sticks (laughter) but by native style I’m much more a storyteller. Matter of fact, sometimes for presentations I’ve written fables and presented. ..a particular Board of Directors - I remember we were struggling with an issue about strategy and where do we go and they had a very difficult time seeing themselves in the picture, right? and what they were causing to happen in the organization. So I wrote this about 6-8 page fable, and read it at the board meeting – about the Middle Ages – and lik-

¹⁴ “... it is not that before you can understand it you need to be specially trained in abstruse matters, but the contrast between understanding the subject and what most people want to see. Because of this the very things which are most obvious may become the hardest of all to understand. What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect” (Wittgenstein 1980a, 17).

ened our organization to a marauding band that had to support itself off the land at the same time it was trying to. ...and they got it – they could find themselves and it was very helpful.

Ann: Did they make those connections with themselves?

Mike: Oh yes, it wasn't subtle (laughter) It just moved it out into a safer context for them to see themselves..."

It is, perhaps, strange that a fictitious tale of a marauding band from long ago should provide listeners with transitional understandings and action guiding anticipations appropriate to their circumstances now, when talk of 'the facts' as they are now can leave people 'cold', i.e., unmoved, so to speak. But again, it needs to be born in mind that while the solving of a problem is an intellectual matter, a matter of 'figuring out' something within one's head, the kinds of struggles we face in navigating a course of action for the very first time, are much more a matter of one's *orientation*, of finding a way of appropriately relating oneself to the others and othernesses in one's surroundings.

Here, then, as I already indicted above, we can begin to see another way in which what could be called 'theory' – but I will simply call it the voicing of 'imaginative or possible theory-talk' to ourselves or others – can influence us in our practical actions out in the world of our everyday, practical affairs. While we should not of course, as practitioners, rigorously subject ourselves to the words of theorists, we can sometimes find the actual words of a theorist, i.e., his or her *utterances*, instructive; they can 'instruct' us, can 'direct' our attention toward *this* or *that* aspect of events occurring around us in our surroundings that we might not otherwise notice. Indeed, as Vygotsky (1978) puts it: "The child begins to perceive the world not only through his [or her] eyes but also through his [or her] speech" (32) – and we as adults can also come to see the world around us *through* our speech, and the speech of *others*, as well.

This suggests that, when facing a uniquely difficult situation – one that does not present us with a well-defined problem to solve, but which requires a first-time struggle from us to overcome it – instead of turning away from such an event, and burying ourselves in thought in an attempt to *explain* it within an appropriate theoretical scheme, we should act quite differently. We should turn ourselves more responsively toward it, and instead of responding

to it in *our own* already established general terms, open ourselves to responding to it (or to at least aspects of it) *in its own* terms, i.e., as uniquely itself. Indeed, we can begin an extensive and intensive, i.e., nuanced and detailed, two-way (dialogically-structured) exploratory interaction of them with them, approaching them *this way* and *that way*... while being 'moved' to act in *this way* and *that* in accord with the beneficial 'reminders' (Wittgenstein 1953, no. 127) or 'pointers' donated to us by those who have found such 'pointers' useful in their own similar such explorations.

Specific words – of our own or of another – can, if they are uttered at a timely moment as a 'reminder' as to the possible character of our next step within an ongoing practical activity, be a crucial influence in the development and refinement of that activity. The kind of knowledgeable inquiry involved here begins with our being "struck," with our noticing of, to use Bateson's (1979) phrase, a "differences that make a difference" (453). Elsewhere (e.g., Shotter 2000, 2001), I have discussed in particular the suitability of Wittgenstein's (1953) methods for inquiries of this kind – inquiries into unique, only once-occurrent circumstances, in which participants within them are concerned to elaborate and refine. For, as he notes: "The origin and primitive form of the language game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop. Language – I want to say – is a refinement, 'in the beginning was the deed'[Goethe]" (Wittgenstein 1980a, 31). "But what is the word 'primitive' meant to say here?," he can be heard as going on to ask himself: "Presumably," he answers, "that this sort of behavior is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based *on it*, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought" (Wittgenstein 1981, no. 541).

In other words, it is precisely from, *and only from*, the noticing of such *striking events* – such differences that make a difference – that new ways of thinking, seeing, talking, valuing, and being, can begin and be developed. And indeed, Dr. Arlene Katz and I (Katz/Shotter 1996a, 1996b; Shotter/Katz 1996; Shotter 1998), making use of Wittgenstein's remarks (along with remarks from many others), have begun to develop a set of methods that we

call the methods of a “social poetics.”¹⁵ Its overall aim is the development within a collaborating group of appropriate ‘ways of looking’, i.e., of paying attention, to subtle and fleeting once-occurrent events of importance in their shared practice, along with an appropriate vocabulary for not only creating and sustaining these ‘ways of looking’, those sensitivities, but also for sustaining the open, dialogical forms of relationship within which such forms of spontaneous responsiveness are possible. If they can be sustained, then, in such forms of co-operative, synergistic, or collaborative practices, it is possible to develop self-reflecting, self-critical, self-researching, and thus self-developing practices. But to say this, is not to say anything very revolutionary, for such a form of ‘research’ is already a part of our everyday practices,¹⁶ it is only revolutionary to recognize that fact.

We have here, then, a process of inquiry in which practitioners become co-researchers, and researchers become co-practitioners, as each articulates what they have been ‘struck by’ in the unfolding process. It is a process in which both researchers and practitioners alike are engaged in creating *with* each other an “action guiding” sense *from within* their lived and living experience of their shared circumstances. But such an action guiding sense can emerge only in the collaborative dialogical activities occurring between them; once it ceases, such a guiding sense ceases to exist. While it is in existence, practice, teaching and research can all be enfolded within each other, while one in-forms and creates the other in an ever evolving, generative fashion. Both inquiry and learning in this process thus becomes a matter of “practical authorship” (Shotter/Cunliffe 2003) in which managers and workers, researchers and practitioners, all co-construct that which they create and learn together. But in such a process, it is not only the participants’ shared circumstances that are refined and further developed, participants also change in their identities – for the changes within them are not only epistemological, they are also ontological (Shotter 1984). It is our spontaneous, embodied

¹⁵ Ann Cunliffe (2001), as is apparent from my references to her work in this article, has developed these methods extensively also in managerial settings.

¹⁶ Tom Andersen (pers. comm.).

ways of seeing and acting in the world that we change.... we change in who we 'are', how we relate ourselves to our surroundings.

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