

Reflections on John Shotter: Philosopher, Critical Thinker and Tinkerer

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I first met John Shotter on the pages of *Theory and Psychology* and later in person at the 1991 Narrative & Psychotherapy Conference. My impression of John then, and since, is that of a generous man ahead of his time who challenges and inspires our thoughts and practices. I am honored and pleased to be a member of a growing international community of people in which John is a central figure.

Each time I board an airplane, I take tattered and marked-up copies of John's writings. I've read them over and over again, each time noticing something that catches my attention in a different way. I've often smiled at noticing an incoming email or Skype message from John – while I was still in my night clothes, hair uncombed, sipping my first cup of coffee – and anticipated what jewel I might receive that day. John joined the International Summer Institute in 2014 and 2015, and graciously contributed electronically in 2016. Institute participants responded as if they received a precious gift. Themes he addressed included: what constitutes a good human being, deep dialogicality, the something that comes before participating in dialogue, and what is special about “open dialogue.” John continually emphasizes the notion that everything said is in response to what has been said before and the importance of speaking and responding so that everyone in the room *might* understand.

Of course I, like others, occasionally struggle with his ideas and long sentences. But consider the jewels of language created by his unique way of putting together, as well as inventing, words. I will mention a few: “a sense of disquiet;” “the dense white darkness of the fog;” “our *coming into being* as human beings;” “the performative, ‘action-shaping’ functions of our ‘speaking;’” and “othernesses.” I continually ponder his remarkable grasp and interpretations of classic philosophers and contemporary critical thinkers as well as his recent discussions of Barad, Bertau, and Lipari.

John Shotter has critiqued academic psychology since the 1960's, particularly for its omission of what it actually means to be a good human being.

...we cannot achieve the kind of understandings of our everyday “works” that we seek by a recourse to traditional scientific methods alone, i.e., just by the use of theory-cased and/or theory-driven methods. The reasons I gave many years ago (Shotter, 1975), were that, although modern psychology promised to discover our true nature in its experimental laboratories, in fact it only investigated there what happens when people were, or still are, treated as if they are rates, machines, information processors, or some other non-human entity out in the world around us, while the fact of our being responsible for the creation and sustaining of our human nature – as persons within a culture with a long developmental history to it – was, and still is, often ignored... Thus, the idea of us as persons, in relation to all the others and othernesses around us, capable of creating in our ‘works’ so many different ways of actualizing and expressing amongst ourselves our

humanness, did not then seem to be needed, and often now, still does not seem to be needed as a central focus in the so-called mainstream social and behavioural sciences.

John reiterates concepts such as: the primary function of language is formative, the importance of ordinary language, taking the other person into account when using language, human communication as ontologically formative and beginnings and becomings. His reiterations elaborations exemplify the generative nature of language in putting silent thoughts into words or sounds.

For me, reading John's words is what I imagine it's like to perform improvisational jazz or sing polyphonic music such as a Gregorian chant. As I'm reading the words, I feel like I'm having a conversation with John, others, and myself – sometimes simultaneously, sometimes sequentially. My thoughts and responses to his words attain their own unique rhythms as I adjust to the words. It is not important that I understand exactly as John does – that would be impossible since understanding is fluid, never still.

Like in polyphonic music each voice is distinct and has its own melody and rhythm. Though each voice may appear to stand alone, each needs the other voices to enhance it. As each voice enters, it invites the others to create the potential for something new and different to emerge. Each voice welcomes the entrance of another voice. A collective story is told, although it is never considered the real or final one. This illustrates the impossibility of dialogue standing still. Each voice remains the same, injecting its own meaning, yet also becomes another as new or nuanced meanings emerge. Those not speaking (like singers or musicians waiting for their moment to join in) listen and attend to the others while also engaging in their own inner musical conversation: attunement (Anderson, 1997, pp. 231-232).

John Shotter's words invite me to expand my thoughts about how our self-narratives, which are always rooted in social and cultural narratives, can hinder and permit possibilities for newness in thought and action. He speaks of providing “new and empowering accounts of ourselves instead of disabling ones.” In his words:

It is like the British oral historian Ronald Frazier's response to his analyst's question, “What exactly are you hoping for?” Frazier responded, “To find, to re-create a past with a certain certainty that I can put it behind me and go on with my life” ...He was able to give shape and form to his life while remaining rooted in his culture (Shotter, 1991).

I thank John for helping me and others to continually seek new accounts of ourselves and others that hold the potential for our preferred futures. Please join me in a community committed to honoring and ensuring that John's contributions live on and grow.

References

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- Shotter, J. (1991, May). Consultant re-authoring: The “making” and “finding” of narrative constructions. Paper presented at the Houston-Galveston Conference on *Narrative and Psychotherapy: New Directions in Theory and Practice*, Houston, TX.

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