

How to be Inspired by John Shotter

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John Shotter has for many years been an inspirational figure for those who oppose conventional so-called ‘scientific’ psychology and who are looking for alternative, more humanizing ways of exploring psychological issues. In the earlier part of his career, John concentrated on exposing the failures of mainstream psychology, arguing that its models were intrinsically flawed, because they underestimate the essentially social nature of humans. In the second part of his career, John has developed new concepts and ways of understanding how humans interact with each other, thereby providing new tools for psychological practitioners.

In a previous tribute to John’s immense work, I have suggested that his perspective rests upon three crucial components (Billig, 2016). First, there is John’s stress upon ‘joint action.’ Contrary to the classic associationist theories, humans are not formed by the way that their individual minds process information, but their minds are formed within social interaction. This means that our actions typically are not the result of individual mental processing, but are joint actions taken in relation to others. Second, general laws of psychological functioning are bound to fail because they ignore the fact that every moment of our lives – every joint action that we take – is in its own way unique.

Third, John has been concerned with the way that psychologists write their theories and results. Psychological approaches are not just based on theories and methodologies, but their rhetoric is all-important. For that reason, John has advocated that psychologists should develop their own ‘poetics,’ in order to bring out the uniqueness and shared nature of action. Here John has been highly unique. He has not tried to imitate his own intellectual heroes – or those whom he calls his ‘textual friends’ (Shotter, 1993). He writes in a very different way to his greatest textual friend, Wittgenstein, who hardly ever quoted anyone else and who wrote as if he owed no intellectual debt to anyone else. John’s style is much more scholarly and he always expresses his own enthusiasm for other writers. He is generous in quoting others and attributing forerunners to his own ideas. In consequence, to read John’s writings is always to come into contact with great theorists such as Bakhtin, Merleau-Ponty, Vico and, of course, Wittgenstein.

My own concern with the rhetoric of academic work matches John’s (Billig, 2013). Like John, I have been worried that the ‘official’ style of psychological writing hides more than it reveals. In my view, the customary style for writing experimental reports encourages an unnoticed exaggeration of ‘effects.’ Experimental authors learn to write as if all their ‘subjects’ displayed a ‘significant’ effect, which is rarely, if ever, the case. This style enables authors to avoid specifying (or even calculating) just how many (or how few) of their ‘subjects’ may have been affected by the main variable.

John and I might share a concern with the way that mainstream psychologists write and how they are officially encouraged to share a common ‘scientific’ style. And I absolutely agree with him about the need to develop alternative poetics. But this does not mean that I have attempted to copy John’s unique style of writing. To do so would be to devalue his message. In the case of the poetics that John is advocating, imitation is not the sincerest form of flattery: it is the most obvious sign of misunderstanding. Just as each moment is unique, according to John, so each individual writer (and speaker) must develop their own unique voice. For me, or anyone else, to try to write like John – or for him to try to copy my style of writing – would be an act of bad faith. Indeed, John’s writing style is close to his spoken word and, for all who know him personally, this gives his writing a great sense of personal authenticity.

This raises an important issue about how to be inspired by John, especially for those of us who are not practitioners. We should not attempt, as it were, a mental cloning. That would be an unnecessary act. The world already has John. Why would it require a second John? Moreover, to copy John would not be to copy him, for he never copied anyone. By his example, he shows the necessity to oppose, rather than to imitate. His own work has been developed in opposition to mainstream psychology. He has delighted in the work of others who have opposed the orthodoxies of their own time and who have done so in their own specific ways.

Moreover, John has retained his enthusiasm for intellectual work. It is rare to speak to him without him enthusing over some book or article that he has just read. His enthusiasms never fit a constant pattern. He does not derive great pleasure from having followers who might reproduce his ideas as if he were the Master. He delights in those who can teach him something new and who can tell him something about the world that has not previously occurred to him. Thus, to be inspired by John should not mean trying to reproduce John. Over the years, when I have been writing something John has often been my imagined, ideal reader. I write in the hope that I can interest him, as I have learned so much from him. Just as John’s spoken and written voices inextricably converge, so does his position as both a unique textual and real friend.

References

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