

Twenty-One Words That Made a Difference: John's Inspiration

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I recently contributed a chapter to the book of *Essays in Honour of John Shotter* (Corcoran and Cromby, 2016), in which the title sums up John's impact on my work and upon work in the field of organization and management studies – *Twenty-One Words That Made a Difference: Shifting Paradigms*. Those 21 words were in *Conversational Realities* (1993), a book I just happened to stumble across when struggling with my Ph.D. I didn't realize at the time that John was literally across the road from me (I was working in a US Business School) in the Communication Department. I happened to meet him at a Rom Harre seminar he organized and, since then, we have been friends and written together. In the US, it's rare for business school academics to look beyond their own discipline, but I grew up in the UK and was doing my Ph.D. at Lancaster University, where a Doctor of Philosophy meant having at least a basic understanding of philosophy. I was embroiled in the then fad of postmodernism and looking for a way forward. *Conversational Realities* offered that way and was the start point for reading much more of John's work.

But what were those 21 words that had such an impact on my life and career?

"I shall take it that the basic practical moral problem in life is not what to do but what [who] to be..." (Shotter, 1993, p. 118)

I change the 'what' to 'who' to be – because this, I believe, is crucial. US Business Schools are mainly concerned with what to do: what are effective human resource management techniques, what are the five steps to good planning, what are good leadership behaviours, what is a strategy for managing change, what are the 5, 6, 10 roles of an effective manager, and so on. Organization and Management Studies (OMS), as John has noted in relation to Psychology, mainly researches structures, systems, and people as objects and concepts – as bundles of cognitive schemas, perceptions, competencies, etc. It also embraces 'after-the-fact' abstract theorizing – which means that I will never get published in the top four (US-based) journals in my discipline! And while in the UK and Europe the Discourse of 'impact' and 'relevance' is influential, it hasn't quite grasped the subtleties of John's distinction (2006) between 'aboutness' and 'witness' thinking, on the need to focus on 'living wholes' and 'words in their speaking'. Impact is often defined as making our theories relevant to practice. Within Organization and Management Studies, it is scholars who focus on process and practice that connect more comfortably with his work, perhaps because they are also challenging conventional epistemologies. John has coaxed us into thinking more processually and practically about researching, organizing, and managing.

Those 21 words shifted the way I went on to do my research and to teach. John's ideas inspired me to move away from the 'whats,' to exploring 'who' in my research and my teaching. In my research, I moved away from functionalism to social construction, hermeneutic phenomenology and reflexivity. Not just in terms of researching organizations and management from a social constructionist perspective, but to think more reflexively about my own relationships and responsibilities as a researcher –

responsibility for/with our research participants and for the research accounts we write (e.g., Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). Indeed, while reflexivity is often implied rather than explicit in John's work, I think it underpins much of what he writes because he challenges us to question what is taken for granted in our modes of inquiry, to examine what it means to be a relationally-responsive practical author/manager/researcher.

But going back to the importance of 'who to be,' which has become a central concern in my own research and life...for many years...John has urged us to focus on how to:

“develop and sustain between us different, particular ways of relating ourselves to each other” (Shotter, 1996, p. 299)

and on the moral responsibility we have to others within our 'engaged social activities' (Shotter, 2016). I see this as particularly crucial to our studies of leadership in Organizational and Management Studies because it leads us to the issue of what it means to be a good leader and a good person. When teaching leadership (and research methods), I begin with questions of ontology – what do we believe is the nature of social and organizational realities, and what does it mean to be human – and a responsive and responsible leader – in the world (Cunliffe, 2009, 2014; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011)? How do/should we relate with others? All questions that John continues to explore.

Finally, how has John Shotter inspired me? I think his words are in every paper I've written – and if he's missing from one, then he will not be far away because we would have discussed it sometime and in some place!

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