

Performing Dialogism: My Experience of Dialogue with John Shotter

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*“- But do you think you’re a sick person?
- Very sick, in the soul, you know? I think I’m sicker than thousands of people” (...)
(Conversation between a therapist and Marta, a patient of a mental health support group)*

“My soul has the weight of the light. It has the weight of the music. It has the weight of the word never spoken, that soon, who knows, might be spoken. It has the weight of a memory. It has the weight of longing. It has the weight of a look. It weighs how it weighs an absence. And the tear that was not shed. It has the immaterial weight of solitude in the midst of others.”

Clarice Lispector (Gotlib, 2009)

My first contact with Professor John Shotter occurred 14 years ago when I had the privilege of being his student at the University of New Hampshire (Durham, USA). At the time, I was 26 years old, studying for my PhD in the University of São Paulo (Ribeirão Preto, Brazil) and had received a scholarship to carry out part of my research under the guidance of Professor Sheila McNamee. My interest was to study the meaning making process in a mental health therapeutic group, focusing on how the interactions experienced in the group context could favor the conversational construction of change. Among the activities suggested by Professor McNamee for my training were the courses, *Language and Social Interaction* and *Theories of Language and Discourse*, both taught by Professor John Shotter.

I had already been studying the social constructionist field prior to my trip and therefore knew the importance and reputation of Professor Shotter as a critical thinker in Psychology. I was, however, unaware that in addition to a great author, I would meet an extremely generous human being, whose teachings transformed my relationship with my study and, more broadly, with psychology as a science. His classes were always challenging for me due to their dense and original content. More than this, I experienced another learning, almost tacit, in the way Professor Shotter *performed* the teaching-learning relationship itself. The analysis of the texts was carried out in detail. The invitation was for us to listen to the words in their nuances, making it possible to feel their sound, their dance, the moment and context in which they were written. Each word was “unpacked”, generating new connections, in an infinite cycle of constructed possibilities.

One of the arresting moments that I experienced in my learning process was when Professor Shotter agreed to read my research material. From a huge amount of transcriptions of group therapy sessions, I had selected for analysis the relationship of the group with one of the participants, Marta, a lonely woman, who narrated a story of relationship problems. In the conversations she had with the group, there were only

arguments and disagreements. The members of the group could not legitimize the story of Marta, confronting the truth of her narrative. The more the group questioned, the more Marta defended herself, in a pattern of interaction that generated tension and anxiety for everyone. When we talked about this material, Professor Shotter pointed out countless subtle and significant passages in which rich words of emotion and meaning had passed unnoticed among the participants of the group. The words of Marta, when they were enunciated, embodied a whole way of life. Therefore, they could not be treated like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, to be discovered objectively by a researcher interested in finding out the truth about their speaker and about a supposed functioning of a group. Motivated by these provocations of Professor Shotter, I took the option of redirecting my PhD thesis based on the responsive rhetorical version of social constructionism proposed by him (Shotter, 2000) and social poetics as a method of inquiry (Shotter, 1998). Through these ideas, I started to comprehend the group as a conversational resource, the therapeutic potential of which is constructed in each interactive moment, in a joint action of negotiation of meanings of the world and of the members themselves. Following this logic, the contrast between monological and dialogical conversations that were woven within this context could offer clues about the conversational construction of change in group therapy and might contribute to clinical practice in this field (Guanaes, 2006).

Luckily, a doctoral research project allows some understanding, however, does not end a process of learning or personal and professional formation. Therefore, life was providing me with many other provocations, which helped me to review my learning. One of these provocations happened when I was introduced to Tom Andersen by Helena Maffei Cruz, in 2005, on the occasion of his participation in the *Triângulo Austral* Project. I had recently defended my PhD thesis, and Helena, the project coordinator in Brazil, had invited me to assist in the process of translating Tom's speeches during his activities in Brazil into Portuguese. When I was introduced to Tom, Helena started telling him something that would possibly bring us together: she said that I had recently finished my doctorate, which was developed based on some of Professor Shotter's ideas. Tom then asked me which of Professor Shotter's works I had used. Among other possibilities, I cited the book, "Conversational realities," and Tom told me casually: "Oh, John has gone well beyond that now!" After the initial shock of those who lose their ground, I was overcome by curiosity to seek this "beyond." Beyond...where to? What had not been achieved in the previous proposals? What ideas would Professor Shotter now question? How could I better understand the process experienced in the group I had studied in my doctoral research, especially the lifeworld of its participants? Certainly, there with Tom Andersen, I experienced an arresting moment - given my naivety to have believed that my understanding had ended.

A few more years passed. From a student, I became a professor in the Psychology Department of the University of São Paulo (Ribeirão Preto), and continued to have Professor Shotter as an important "textual friend" (Shotter, 1993). Thus, it was in a continuation of an uninterrupted dialogue for me that, in 2012, I was honored to receive Professor Shotter on a visit to Brazil. For a week, he met with undergraduates, professors and students of our graduate program, presenting his ideas, discussing research projects and helping us to overcome the barriers in our comprehension of research and professional practice. Differentiating difficulties of intellect (related to problems that can be solved through rational thought, based on theories) from difficulties of orientation (corresponding to the way we relate, including bodily, to the events around us), Professor Shotter helped us to reflect on our relationship with the studies we

performed and their potential for transformation of the dilemmas that people face in order to carry on with their lives. Thus, in a delicate and subtle way, Professor Shotter highlighted to us the importance of valuing the practices more than the theories. In the world of practices, objective language, which describes actualities, gives way to poetic, allusive language, of the metaphors and of the imagination; the language of singleness gives space for the multiplicity; sensing similarities, not seeing patterns. There was a need, according to him, to welcome the comprehension that we live in a world that is “still coming into being, a turbulent, not-yet-settled, dialogically-structured world, a world that is still-in-the-making” (Shotter, 2012). With this, new questions were raised. How can we break from the modern tradition of psychological science embodied in us, which places us as seeking to unravel truths and construct “after the fact objective analyses?” How can we follow a path closer to the practical, comprehending that much more takes place in the experience of the participants of an interaction “before the fact of their happening” – processes that are difficult to objectively name (Shotter, 2014)? Finally, how can we integrate theory and real life in our efforts to transform clinical practice so that it can truly meet the needs of those who turn to it?

Ten years after our meeting in Durham, I could again experience the feeling that it was not just ideas being discussed....I was again in front of my professor, *performing* the ideas that he would discuss with the same elegance and generosity. While being tolerant and patient with the avalanche of questions of intellect we initially presented him with (in a “aboutness thinking,” which sought to end understandings), he *performed* with us the “withness thinking,” teaching us, in practice, how to establish a responsive and dialogical bodily relationship. From this meeting, I could comprehend that I was not in front of just a great thinker and theoretician. I was, above all, faced with a true practitioner – who performed dialogism with us, in each encounter experienced, linking theory and practice with the potential to transform lives.

Thus, once again I had the opportunity to stop and review the path that I had traveled. Taking again the case of the patient Marta as an illustration, I might have fallen into the trap that, in 2002, Professor Shotter had already pointed out to me – of trying to rationally comprehend the difficulties Marta presented emotionally and bodily to the group as if they were difficulties of intellect, and not of orientation. Marta told the group that she “felt sick in the soul,” but this was heard through psychiatric discourse and its derivative labels. As stated by Professor Shotter in an interview that he gave at the end of his visit to Brazil, “As soon as you get treatments which are being done according to recipes and tick boxes and protocols, and you get alienated doctors, alienated nurses, just acting mechanically, caring for people just disappears” (Guanaes-Lorenzi, et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, life did not give me another opportunity to meet with Marta, the patient of that support group. However, it gave me a chance to work in mental health contexts and talk to many other patients and their families, seeking, in my practice, to listen more sensitively to the poetry that inhabits every human being in the composition of his/her uniqueness; to the expressions that precede the verb; to the subtle dance that the words have when they are spoken and reveal a world of still unexplored possibilities, souls marked by the weights of each story experienced. In the conversations with these patients and their families, the words of Marta always accompany me, reminding me that “pains of the soul” differ from “pains of the intellect.” Pains of the soul do not fit into the static explanations about the human being and life itself, as Professor Shotter

indicated to me early on. Based on this, what I try to do in my practice today is just offer the other my presence and desire to go on together. In each conversation, surprises and possible alternatives emerge from our meeting. In these moments, I thank Professor John Shotter for the day he destabilized my certainties, taught me that “to live goes beyond all understanding,” as the Brazilian poet Clarice Lispector also once said.

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