

Dialogic Social Inquiry: Attunement, Responsivity and Answerability

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Abstract

This article presents dialogic social inquiry as an alternative to methodologically-driven qualitative research, suggesting pre-figured models dull researchers' attunement to the living dynamic ecologies at the centre of their inquiry efforts. Dialogic social inquiry is described as situationally-driven, intrinsic to life, and indigenous to communities around the globe. Featuring a confessional account of a pivotal juncture within the author's doctoral dissertation experience, the article discusses the radical implications of dialogic premises and practices within qualitative social inquiry contexts. Special attention is given to the researcher's role of co-respondent instead of analyst or interpreter. This article encourages facilitators of even the most formal investigations to do—above all else— 'what the occasion calls for' (Anderson, 2007b), thereby remaining answerable throughout every developing phase of the inquiry event.

Key Words: *dialogic, qualitative research, collaborative, social constructionist, decolonizing*

“The task of understanding how to develop a mode of inquiry appropriate to events always occurring *for another next first time*, is a task of a most unusual kind” (Shotter, 2008, p. viii).

Collaborative dialogic practitioners and scholars describe their work as *shared inquiry* and *everyday research* (Anderson, 1997; Anderson & Gehart, 2007; Anderson, 2012, 2014; Gehart, arragona, & Bava, 2007; McNamee & Hosking, 2012; Shotter, 2014; St. George & Wulff, 2014; St. George, Wulff, & Tomm, 2015). The dialogic social inquiry characterizing our collaborative professional work simply continues the inquiry intrinsic to life (Seikkula, 2011). When we are perplexed, troubled, or uncertain how to proceed, we engage with others and *otherness* in an earnest search for practical possibilities. We live into our questions, and, as Rilke (1934) wrote, we gradually *live into* their answers. A timeless, relational way of generating practical understanding and social transformation, familiar to citizens around the globe, dialogic methods of inquiry are embedded in life: “To live means to participate in dialogue....” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293).

Contrasting with our everyday, dialogic investigations, our more formal academic research commonly follows established, ready-made research methodologies, familiar to scholarly institutions but unfamiliar and dis-indigenous to the research ‘subjects’ and situations central to each qualitative social research project. Differing from the tentative, incremental, and *recalibrative* unfolding of our everyday inquiries, qualitative research privileges systematic, automated research methodology. Legitimized methodologies are thought to provide legitimized outcomes, “more or less bankable guarantees” (Law, 2004, p. 9). “As a framework, method *itself* is taken to be at least provisionally secure” (Law, 2004, p. 10).

Do systematic qualitative research methodologies guarantee legitimate outcomes? Do legitimized methodologies ‘mirror’ the world as it really is (Gergen, 2015)? Decolonization, social

construction, and various critical movements, question the “presumed superiority” (Heritage, 1984, p. 6) of conventional qualitative methodology over peoples’ familiar, dialogic methods of inquiry (Anderson, 2012a, 2012b; Aveling, 2013; Baskin, 2011; Brown & Strega, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Gergen, 2015; Law, 2004; McNamee & Hosking, 2012; Reynolds, 2014; Wilson, 2008). This scrutiny is particularly warranted in the Canadian city where I live, which is deeply divided between dominant European settlers and Indigenous peoples struggling to survive historic and present-day catastrophes of colonization and genocide (Comack, Deane, Morrisette, & Silver, 2013). Cree scholar, Shaun Wilson (2008) contends that social research is usually conducted from a Euro-American research paradigm that differs significantly from Indigenous ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology. Even critical research traditions such as feminist, queer theory, critical race theory, and critical postmodernism which so explicitly aim to oppose injustice, can also inadvertently perpetuate harm: Much critical theory derives from white European ontologies and epistemologies— “not necessarily the appropriate epistemological frame for all race-oriented emancipatory work” (Scheurich & Young, 1997, pp. 9-10; see also hooks, 1990; Schnarch, 2004; West, 1993). How then shall we determine which research methodologies to use in our qualitative academic investigations? How can we distinguish between rigorous social inquiry, and what sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987, 2005) calls, “a regime of ruling”? Whose methods of investigation should lead qualitative social inquiry? Whose timelines, vocabularies, sensibilities, and sensitivities (Shotter, 2010)?

This article builds a case for eliciting qualitative social inquiry method from the living social, cultural, and geographic ecologies at the centre of each research project. Such inquiry is “situationally-driven” (DeFehr, 2012; Shotter, 2008, pp. 31-48) rather than methodologically-driven; it is “participant-driven” (Baskin, 2011, p. 225) rather than participatory. It utilizes research participants’ familiar, local methods of inquiry instead of imposing pre-figured methodology designed by others elsewhere. Its process responds to “what the occasion calls for, and in the manner called for” (Anderson, 2007b, p. 52). I refer to this process as *dialogic social inquiry* while at the same time acknowledging that this process cannot be captured with a single title: it is inherent to life.

In this article, I describe dialogic social inquiry conceptually alongside a story I tell from my own lived experience of dissertation research, a story I narrate throughout the article in several stages using non-academic prose (Badley, 2015; McNamee, 2007; Shotter, 2015). Without *systematizing* my research process, organizing it retrospectively into fixed categories, I highlight characteristics of my dissertation inquiry process that arrest my attention at this current juncture, years after the dissertation took place, characteristics that may spark other social inquiry efforts developing elsewhere.

I begin with a confessional tale from my dissertation research experience:

The ‘occasion’ I speak of begins with “data” steadily arriving in my email inbox—over a hundred pages of journal writing from nine collaborative dialogue family therapists and social workers living in 6 different countries around the globe. A novice researcher, I am thrilled; all those weeks of preparation behind me, I am flooded with gratitude at the commitment and creativity of my professional colleagues.

There is just one dilemma, and as the excitement begins to fade in the next days, my sense of disquiet and uncertainty intensifies. Like most graduate students, I began my dissertation with the assumption that it would be led, and legitimized, by a systematic research methodology—a qualitative method requiring various analytical or interpretive procedures well-suited to my central qualitative question. I assumed my responsibility, as a doctoral candidate and ‘independent scholar’ in a European PhD program, was to locate the most appropriate methodology ‘out there’ and apply it to our unique research project.

The dilemma is that as I study research handbooks, consult other completed dissertations, and consult with colleagues, no research method feels quite right for the highly-esteemed colleagues in my project—I cannot yet articulate why. Weeks, and even months pass as I keep searching for the research methodology that will inform and direct my next step and all the steps to follow...

Systematic Qualitative Social Research

In systematic qualitative methodologies, social research follows the directives of a chosen methodology—such as grounded theory, phenomenology, or ethnography. The investigative process resembles the extraction industries (Kvale, 1996): After mining enough ‘data,’ usually through interviews, (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Shuy, 2003), the back and forth up-close relational engagement typical of the beginnings of qualitative social research comes to an end as researchers typically retreat and begin to “de-relate” (Strong, 2004, p. 215),

...turning away from local scenes and their participants, from relations formed and personal debts incurred in the field. Now an author working at her desk, she [the researcher] reviews her recordings of members’ everyday experiences and reorients to her fieldnotes as texts to be analyzed. (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995, p. 169)

Adopting roles of data analysts or interpreters, researchers seemingly close and finalize the previously developing interactions comprising their inquiry. Positioning themselves outside of and above the utterances of research participants (Bakhtin, 1986), researchers then systematically apply various ready-made analytic and interpretive strategies, devices, and tactics, according to the requirements of their chosen research methodologies. Reviewing communications with participants retrospectively, conventional qualitative researchers begin the task of revealing what the data ‘really is’ in its presumed core essence, or what the data ‘really means.’ Conventional analytic and interpretive devices require researchers to code, re-order, de-contextualize, classify, and count participant utterances. With the aim of making the data more refined, and more manageable, analytical and interpretive practices commonly generate a static hierarchy of themes, sub-themes, and non-themes (DeFehr, 2008; Ellingson, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Perakyla & Ruusuvuori, 2011). Traditional qualitative data analysis separates participant utterances from the macro and micro conversational contexts that give them their uniqueness, agency, and rich meanings. Adopting an analyst or interpretive role, the researcher remains accountable and *answerable* (Katz & Shotter, 2004) primarily to the research methodology directing the research process. The researcher must demonstrate faithfulness to the declared process to keep the research process *plumb* (Chenail, 1997) to a pre-set course. Oriented to a set of methodological directives that cannot sense, hear, and see movement within the living research context, the researcher—

committed to their selected methodological assemblage—cannot readily recalibrate the inquiry process when the occasion inevitably continues to emerge, develop, and shift. A systematic research methodology—however compelling it may be to ethics committees and funders—automates social inquiry, constraining its agility and responsivity to the obligations and possibilities afforded by each unique, living, developing inquiry social ecology (Law, 2004).

Feeling lost and unsure of my next steps, I feel compelled to return to the daily journal fragments sent by my colleagues. I open the first one to arrive and read it again,” for another first time” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9). ‘Taken’ and moved by my Mexican colleague’s journal writing, I in turn want to write response back to her, not the brief “thank you so much” I sent initially, but I want to respond to each utterance. I slowly do so, winding my way through her text. My responsive writing is unplanned, formed in the moment; it is embodied, not only the work of my cognition but also the offering of my bodily ability to sense and feel, anticipate and imagine. Separated by thousands of miles, I want her to feel certain of my presence with her words; I want her to see signs of my attunement to her experience. My goal is not to be clever or profound. I do not write as an analyst of her contribution, as though she needs me to speak for her, and I do not search for themes, sub-themes, or non-themes in her writing. Neither do I go into her journaling to identify its essential core, component parts. I do not code her words, nor organize them, classifying her writing under headings as this or that, as though I am sorting cutlery in the kitchen. I am not looking to generate a research by-product (Gergen & Gergen, 2000) an outcome such as a new model, theory, or as Garfinkel (2006) said, an “artificial device” (p. 128), a souvenir of my scholarly travel, proof of my academic ability for my graduation day. Similarly I do not set out to interpret her journaling as though she requires someone to dig behind her utterances (Sontag, 1961) and present, or refine, what she is really saying, really meaning.

Dialogic Social Inquiry: Co-authors Instead of Research Participants

Using our research project members’ familiar dialogic methods of social inquiry, I use writing to respond to my colleagues’ journal writings in our inquiry project. My project focuses on reciprocity and positive mutual influence in collaborative dialogic counseling practices and participants in my dissertation research offer two weeks of journaling in response to our project’s central question, “How could you describe your practice as generating and transforming for yourself, as a collaborative dialogic practitioner?” (DeFehr, 2008). Instead of writing *about* the journaling adopting the genre of report writing, I write dialogically, directly *into* their journal writings, using italicized font for my voice, responding to their utterances as a way of listening and hearing them attentively and fully, as a way of honouring them, and as a way entering their texts and receiving them instead of writing about them as an on-looker positioned outside of them (Anderson, 1997; Bortroft, 2012; Hoffman, 2007b; Morson & Emerson, 1990; Shotter, 2011). To understand our spoken and written dialogues in a dialogic manner, we simply continue—*further*—(Strong & Paré, 2004) our dialogic engagement, following where it leads (Katz and Shotter, 2004; Gadamer, 1975). I write response as a way of listening (DeFehr, 2008) and learning (Adams St Piere, 2005). “A good listener responds *into* a conversation ...” (Anderson, 1997, p. 52). Creative writing mentor, Natalie Goldberg (2005) suggests, writing is “... 90 percent listening. You listen so deeply to the space around you that it fills you, and when you write, it pours out of you” (p. 90).

Through the activity of responsive writing, I meet my colleagues in the genre they offer instead of retrospectively reporting about their writing as analyst or interpreter positioned over them. Dialogic understanding is produced *in* our living, emerging engagement, not afterwards in the conventional goal of finalizing and systematizing it (Schwandt, 2000). I use writing to move around within the utterances of my colleagues, just as they use responsive writing to visit and engage with their everyday work as practitioners. In my efforts to write responsively, I want to achieve “addressive surplus” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 242)—listening that generously exceeds the pragmatic requirements within a particular dialogue: “The addressive surplus is the surplus of the good listener, one capable of ‘live entering’” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 242). Hoping my writing would help lessen the geographical, cultural, and linguistic gaps between our project colleagues, I aspire to show my attentive presence all throughout my colleagues’ journals.

My responsive writing process is not my own but rather derives from the international community of collaborative dialogue practitioners, fourteen of which are part of my dissertation research project. My responsive writing is addressed to members of our group, and it emerges *with* and *within* the group to whom I belong (Hunt & Sampson, 2006). An example of “joint action,” I write with intention, but the writing is generative beyond my intentions (Shotter, 2011). Instead of writing what I think I should write, or writing according to outside theoretical or methodological requirements, I aim to attentively write my first response, the beginnings of my response (DeFehr, 2008) to my colleagues’ journaling. I write in a manner coherent and continuous with the journal writing I address. Having responded to each writer, and in turn heard response in reply, I write response to our project’s journaling as a whole (DeFehr, 2008).

I similarly write responsively to further the face-to-face spoken dialogue at the beginning of our inquiry project, a dialogue that took place at the International Summer Institute in Playa del Carmen, Mexico (DeFehr, 2008). Having transcribed the dialogue, translating spoken conversation into writing on a page, a perilous process inherently unflattering to the spoken utterances of participants (Poland, 2003), I become familiar with the dialogue, noticing its character, moments of intensity, excitement, and tentatively. To be fair to it, in the interest of readability, I narrate it, telling the dialogue in story form. I then write my response into the dialogue story, distinguishing my later contribution throughout the text with the use of italics for my voice (DeFehr, 2008).

There is more that I don't do in my doing. I do not set out to create a re-presentation of her text that could only disappoint as a second-hand, retrospective version of her writing. Rather, I write to listen, I write to hear her, and I write to respond to her as a way to attune my whole being to her utterances. I send my responding to our language translators, and then to her, and in time, she responds to my response. And I know something special is happening: As Anderson (1997) suggests, a genuine dialogue is inherently generative and transforming, new life comes from the intermingling of living organisms—or as Gadamer (1975) puts it, the conversation develops a spirit of its own and its participants are far less the leaders than the led (p. 385). Having responded to each of her utterances through writing, I understand her journaling differently, more fully.

If I engage so closely with one journal I must do so with the others also? Filled with uncertainty I soon turn to the next journal entry and again, without interruption, I begin

simply, writing my italicized response into the journaling of my colleague, utterance by utterance, slowly making my way from its beginning to its open-ended end.

Dialogic Social Inquiry: Co-Respondents Instead of Analysts and Interpreters Spontaneous, Embodied, ‘Mutual Responsivity’

Collaborative dialogue practitioners in counseling, consulting, educational, healthcare, or other contexts, are primarily engaged as *respondents* in the conversations comprising their everyday work. The primary and most crucial action in a dialogic encounter is spontaneous, embodied, responding—*mutual responsivity* (Katz, Shotter, & Seikkula, 2004; Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006; Shotter, 1993, 2008, 2010; Katz & Shotter, 2004), or as Seikkula & Olson (2016) put it, “responsive responsibility” (p. 47). Shotter (2010) describes this quality of responding as spontaneous because it forms within the present moment, within the dynamic flow of conversation, according to “what the occasion calls for, and in the manner called for” (Anderson, 2007b, p. 52). Collaborative dialogue practitioners act from a state of readiness, equipped with “poised resourcefulness” (Storch & Shotter, 2013) instead of working from a pre-fabricated scheme. We describe this quality of responsivity as embodied because it is not only a cognitive activity but the work of whole persons with their abilities to sense, anticipate, and feel (Johnson, 2007). Shotter (2015) further describes such responsivity as not only active but attuned: “listening in a way in which we are oriented wholly towards the *otherness* of the other—entails letting their speech *flow through us*, so to speak, to such an extent that it ‘moves’ us...” (p. 10; see also Shotter, 2008, p. v). Dialogic encounters and interactions (Bakhtin, 1986) are inherently generative and transforming. Shotter (2006) describes further the mutual responsivity central to dialogic inquiry:

Something special happens when one living being acts in the presence of another—for, by its very nature as a living being, the second being cannot help respond to the activities of the first. But the first did not just act of nowhere either; the first acted in response to events in its surroundings too. Thus at work in the world of living beings, is a continuous flow of spontaneously responsive activity within which all such beings are embedded. (p. 29)

“Spontaneously responsive activity” (Shotter, 2006, p. 29)—“mutual responsivity” (Katz & Shotter, 2004, pp. 71-81)—takes the place of analytic and interpretive strategies, coding, and classifying in dialogic social inquiry. Dialogic practices diverge from modernist psychoanalytic and psychiatric preoccupation with analysis and classification. Similarly, in the effort to “be public” (Anderson, 1997, pp. 102-106), collaborative dialogue declines the possibility of developing private or closed-off interpretations of what people are “really saying” or meaning; participants’ thoughts or responses are openly *part* of the developing conversation, not crafted later away from participants’ involvement (Hoffman, 1997). Dialogic social inquiry moves away from looking behind, past, or under human expressions to reveal their supposed real meaning (Sontag, 1961; Bortoft, 2012). Anderson (2007) affirms responses that “clarify and expand” and cautions against responses “... that seek details and facts to determine things like diagnoses and interventions or aim to guide the conversation in a particular direction” (p. 36). Anderson (2007) continuously describes dialogue as “... a participatory activity that requires responding to try to understand—being genuinely curious, asking questions to learn more about what is said and not what you think should be said” (p. 36). Anderson (2007a) writes, “A good listener responds, as Shotter (1995) suggests, “into” the conversation; we act responsively “into” a situation, doing what

‘it’ calls for” (p. 37). Anderson’s (2007b) responding within dialogue is similar to her responding as a listener to a story. “I try to learn about and understand their story by responding to them: I am curious, I pose questions, I make comments and I gesture...” (p. 47). Using the metaphor of a story ball (Anderson, 2007b), Anderson cautions against taking peoples’ stories away from them to suit purposes unknown to the storyteller. Spontaneous, embodied responding involves risk and uncertainty; we cannot know in advance where—and how—a conversation will lead (Anderson, 1997). Dialogue, in this way, cultivates a delightful “surprisingness” (Hopstadius, 2016; Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 2).

Dialogic Practices Community and Mutual Responsivity

Collaborative dialogic practitioners join Anderson in affirming the centrality of mutual responsivity to collaborative, dialogic practice (Katz & Shotter, 2004) and the following examples are only a few of many. Marilyn Frankfurt (Penn & Frankfurt, 1999) observed that her practitioner colleagues, Peggy Penn and Tom Andersen, responded only with words and feelings prompted in them in the moment, within a particular conversation (Penn & Frankfurt, 1999). Frankfurt writes of Tom Andersen’s responsivity, suggesting his responsive feelings, helped open an “exchange of voices” which kept Andersen in “a state of new learning, new understanding, and change,” “a ready space,” (p. 177). Tom Andersen’s (1992) bodily responding let him know how to proceed in his professional meetings with others: “My body, ‘from inside’, lets me know...”, he wrote (p. 55). Christopher Kinman (Kinman, Finck, & Hoffman, 2004) describes *responsible* practice as not being about following rules, or gaining knowledge to act upon, nor “giving obedience to some predefined order” but rather “it is a constantly shifting quest about how we respond to those people around us.... it is how we act in a rhizome world” (p. 243). Rocio Chaveste and Papusa Molina (2013) similarly write of “dialogical activity in which we are spontaneously and relationally responsive to the other, rather than an observer interpreting and analyzing it from the outside looking in” (p. 21). Jaakko Seikkula (2011) also places the profound and simple action of responding at the centre of his work. Seikkula and his colleague Tom Arnkil (2006) suggest, “the form and timing of the reply often becomes secondary” (p. 103); “all understanding is striving for a response...” (p. 102). Replying “... does not mean giving an explanation or interpretation but, rather, demonstrating in a response that one has noticed what has been said...” (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005, p. 466). “It is this responding that needs to happen in a dialogical meeting and actually not very much more” (Arnkil & Seikkula, 2015, p. 142). Likewise, Jaakko Seikkula and Mary Olson (2016) emphasize the crucial importance of responding:

The responses of the therapist(s) in the exchange with the family are key ingredients.... Following Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1994) concept of dialogicality, the responsiveness of the therapist is very important, because interlocutors, those who take part in the conversation, are active co-authors of a person’s utterances and meanings. (p. 47)

‘Witness’ Instead of Research ‘on’ Others

Lynn Hoffman (1998) similarly encourages a less scripted, more vulnerable, sensorial, and open practitioner stance instead of practitioner adherence to models. Hoffman (1998, 2007a, 2007b) described the responsivity of the collaborative dialogue practitioner as “the art of ‘witness’” (Hoffman, 2007b, p. 63). Anderson and other collaborative dialogue practitioners consistently

stress the importance of the word *with*, rather than doing *to*, or doing *for* (Anderson, 1997, 2012a; Ayora Talavera & Chaveste Gutierrez, 2012), walking alongside others as fellow learners, not nudging from behind or coaxing from positions in front (Anderson, 1997; Ness, Borg, Semb, & Karlsson, 2014). Shotter (2011) describes the special quality of knowing that emerges from dialogic interaction as “withness understanding” (pp. 99-116), a generative, close-up, insiders understanding that varies from mechanistic or technical ‘knowing about’ or ‘knowing that.’ Participants in my dissertation research wrote of not only being with, but being “*in with*” (DeFehr, 2008, pp. 321-323) their conversational partners, not in a way that violates professional ethics, but in a way that compassionately humanizes their interactions with the people who meet with them. Hoffman’s reference to the classic Alice in Wonderland story illustrates the risk and commitment characterizing an *in-with* stance; more than drawing close, keeping a safe ‘us-them’ distance, Alice plunges into the pool of tears with the other creatures (Hoffman, 2007b). Hoffman’s dialogic colleagues similarly illustrate the in-with nature of dialogic practice using metaphors of water and leaping: Dialogic inquiry into acute adversity “means giving up the idea of primarily having control over things and, instead, jumping into the same river or rapids with our clients and trying to survive by taking each other’s hands” (Katz, Shotter, & Seikkula, 2004, p. 38).

Mikhail Bakhtin and the Centrality of Responsivity

Beyond the international community of collaborative dialogue practitioners, Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) writing, a foundational inspiration to the collaborative dialogic practices movement, affirms the necessity of responding for understanding:

To some extent, primacy belongs to the response as the activating principle: It creates the ground for understanding; it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other. (p. 232)

Here and elsewhere, Bakhtin (1986) emphasizes “active” response—responding that creates, prepares and activates understanding. We speak with one another in continual anticipation of active response: “From the very beginning the speaker expects a response from them, an active understanding. The entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering this response” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 94). “Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another...” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 68).

Uncertainty persists as my responsive writing process continues. Thoughts of my Master’s Social Work thesis haunt me—that systematic Quazi-Experimental Group Design (DeFehr, 1997) with the statistical analysis—what was I doing, taking these weeks to respond to the written expressions of the colleagues in my project? What if this written engagement prevents me from adopting the research methodology I still hope to discover, compromising the process right from the very start of it? Despite my uncertainty, I know I feel compelled to keep going with the emerging responsive writing process.

Instead of generating understanding of our inquiry dialogues through the application of analytic or interpretive procedures foreign to project members, participants in my dissertation research further understanding by responding to one another as members of a living, dialogic inquiry effort. The role of respondent is familiar to us as practitioners in the collaborative dialogue tradition, and also

familiar to us as living beings, navigating our everyday curiosities and challenges. I join together with my colleagues in the work and pleasure of *furthering* our conversational inquiry as a way of generating practical understanding. Coherent with our everyday work as practitioners in the collaborative dialogue tradition, we did not want to close and finalize our inquiry by subjecting our conversations to analytic or interpretive procedures made elsewhere. As Shotter (2005) writes, we often presume that the only way—or the best way—to generate understanding, is through analytical work:

When confronted with a perplexing, disorienting, bewildering, or astonishing (!) circumstance, we take it that our task is to analyze it (i.e., dissect it) into a unique set of separate elements, to find a pattern... and then to try to invent a theoretical schematism... to account for the pattern so observed.... (p. 141)

Shotter (2005) goes on to suggest the habit of dissecting research dialogue misleads us away from the phenomena we wish to know more fully "... while we cudgel our brains in the attempt to construct an appropriate theoretical schematism into which to fit them" (p. 142). Instead of moving *away from*, my social inquiry goal was to move *closer towards*, to strengthen the relationship between ourselves and the phenomena we wanted to grasp more vividly (Wilson, 2008).

I reach the end of our responsive writing process; I know the phone call to my advisor cannot be postponed any longer. Not knowing how she would respond, I confess, unbelievably, I am still, after all this time, without a legitimate research methodology for my dissertation. Past experience teaches me I should have known my method before I "collected the data." Worse, I disclose that I've become involved in an up-close responsive writing 'dance' with each member of my dissertation inquiry project, a process that has unfolded over months, and, trying to do justice to an experience I feel has been generative and worthwhile beyond words, I speak of the understanding I felt we generated together, evidenced, only in part, by the many pages of journaling we did—in our own peculiar way—together. Not a complete knowledge, but a partial, open-ended understanding that is valuable for us. First my colleagues wrote in response to our agreed-upon research question and in response to their daily practices as family therapists and counsellors. And then I, 'walking alongside' them, wrote my response into their journal texts, our voices intertwining, until we become "transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 371).

I stop talking and wait for the reply. My advisor, Harlene Anderson, begins to speak with what I can still readily recall as a tinge of joy. Perhaps it is relief! It does not matter. She suggests that my 'method' is dialogic—collaborative—just like my everyday work as a counsellor, just like my work as a counselling practicum supervisor, just like my way of being in the world. It takes some minutes for me to let her words sink in. I begin to realize what had happened to us over the last months, something intentional, and also beyond our intentions (Shotter, 1995). Instead of doing research on (Gustavson, 1996) my colleagues, we had engaged in a collaborative conversational social inquiry effort, together. Instead of analyzing or interpreting the words of my research participants—my international colleagues—we were generating understanding within our ongoing project dialogues dialogically. Instead of writing about the words of my colleagues, I wrote to them, and

most important, with them, and “in relation to them” (Wilson, 2008) generating as Peggy Penn and Marilyn Frankfurt (1994) might have agreed, “a participant text” (p. 217) with many co-authors.

Continuous Emergence of Outcomes Instead of Research By-Products

Instead of driving towards the production of a final social science systematization (Morson & Emerson, 1990), or “research product” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 39), such as, a new theory, framework, representation, model, or other “artificial device” (Garfinkel, 2006, p. 128), outcomes emerge continuously, unpredictably, and surprisingly in collaborative dialogic inquiry (Anderson, 2007a, 2007b; Morson & Emerson, 1990). These outcomes, often partial, modest, particular, and delightful, rather than grand and generalizable, tend to have great value, meaning, and practical utility for participants. The outcomes emerging from dialogic inquiry become springboards for additional possibility (Anderson, 2007a, 2007b). Understandings, in dialogic inquiry, are open-ended, open to further influence; they are situated, provisional, fluid, always on the way (Anderson, 1997). Dialogic inquiry is a developing event, not a system, nor a static structure (Morson & Emerson, 1990).

Participants in my dissertation research not only spoke of reciprocity in their practices, but more important, their engagement with our research question helped create the phenomena they described. Our central question asked, “How could you describe your practice as generative and transforming...” which differs from “How *is* your practice generative and transforming...” This is not to suggest participant response was fictitious but rather to acknowledge that dialogic involvement is inherently generative and transforming: When we attempt to describe our experiences, we participate in creating them. When we speak about the generative and transforming aspects of our work for ourselves, we sharpen our awareness of the nurturing qualities inherent in collaborative dialogue work. ‘Wording’ our life experience equips us with a heightened sensitivity to the presence of that which we describe. New possibilities, sensitivities, priorities, and practices emerge. Whether spoken or written, when we engage with one another dialogically and collectively, we change irrevocably. Again Gadamer (1975) reminds us, “To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were” (p. 371).

What was especially significant for me was that we were able to use methods of inquiry that were wholly familiar to each participant in the project; each of us was able to shape not only the content of our project, but its process. We simply allowed ourselves to be led by our unrepeatably, developing conversational inquiry; we allowed ourselves to be moved by it. Whereas conventional qualitative research typically requires people to “de-relate” (Strong, 2004, p. 215) to adopt analyst or interpreter roles after the data is in, this inquiry project offered no closed-door lab work; there was no provision for taking participant words and reformulating them according to my own individual preferences. Similar to the story-ball metaphor often shared by Anderson, our responsive writing process allowed me to ‘place my hands’ on the stories of my colleagues, to be in touch with them, gain a feel for them, but not acquire them as resources for fixed analytical or interpretive procedures made elsewhere.

Situationally-Driven ‘Members’ Methods’ Instead of Pre-Figured Methodology

Beyond requiring the researcher to shift attunement from inquiry participants to the static requirements of the chosen methodology, systematic analytical and interpretive practices are typically foreign to participants at the heart of every social research project. Foreign is not necessarily bad, however, given the concerns considered at the start of this article, we should question the routine practice of by-passing local methods of inquiry—the everyday methods of inquiry familiar to research participants—in favor of research methodologies developed and legitimized by others, in other cultural contexts, in other times. We should question the routine practice of separating and distancing the words of participants from their own ways of understanding. Commonly researchers are required to roll-out the methods of the academy as though research participants have no methods of inquiry to offer. Conventional, methodologically-driven social research habitually requires research participants to entrust their utterances to systematic investigation processes unfamiliar to participants, a process that puts their utterances in a new light, one that may or may not be friendly to their words. Systematic research methodological commonly requires a kind of closed door or back stage process that excludes the presence, sensitivities, and sensibilities (Shotter, 2010) of research participants. Methodologically-driven research allows research participants to contribute to content but blocks their contributions to research process. In dialogic inquiry, content, outcome, and process are intricately and simultaneously intertwined. Systematic qualitative research conventions offer tremendous privilege and empowerment to researchers, but as Anderson (1997) advises, “We must be able to be challenged and to challenge ourselves. We must be able to commit to a dialogical interplay that encourages an egalitarian and mutual search for understanding” (p. 137).

Conclusion

The social science privileging of ready-made, automated research methodology risks perpetuating the longstanding colonial practice of research *on* and *for* people (Gustavson, 1996). Research routinely deploys analytic and interpretive strategies unfamiliar to participants, derived from decades of elite, cultivated academic tradition rather than from local participant lived experience. Not only is the systematic methodological research process dis-indigenous to each particular research context, pre-figured methodology cannot hear, see, feel, or sense, and as a dead thing, it cannot recalibrate continuously in respectful response to the ever-shifting requirements intrinsic to every living social inquiry context. Instead of a multi-voiced, communal act of solidarity contributing directly to the improvement of the social, economic, and political conditions of peoples’ lives (Reynolds, 2014), social research commonly functions as an automated extractive industry that takes deeply and continuously, answering primarily to its own privileged priorities, traditions, and goals.

Every part of the research event changes when inquiry is situationally-directed, indigenous to a particular living social ecology, led by its members’ familiar dialogic methods of inquiry. Remaining “answerable” (Katz & Shotter, 2004, p. 78) in every part of the inquiry effort, the inquiry facilitator joins participants—fellow authors—in the role of co-respondent rather than *analyst* or *interpreter* positioned over and outside of participant utterances. Free from the mechanized traditions of producing a fixed hierarchy of themes and developing a static research

product (Garfinkel, 2006; Gergen & Gergen, 2000), the researcher joins with fellow participants generating understanding and action through mutual responsiveness, a dialogic method of inquiry thoroughly familiar to participants. Authorship becomes more multi-voiced as research participants contribute directly to a collective emerging text. And instead of capturing and mastering phenomena, participants themselves become captured by phenomena, taken by it, moved, and changed irrevocably, in their actions, attitudes, priorities, desires. A thoroughly participant-driven event (Baskin, 2011), dialogic collaborative inquiry matters and makes a difference to its participants and their social contexts.

Moreover, instead of faithfully following the pre-figured steps of a systematic research methodology, the inquiry facilitator—in every phase of the project’s development—remains relationally attuned (Shotter, 2015) to the people, voices, and developing occasion at the center of each inquiry project. In a sense, the collaborative dialogue researcher never leaves the field throughout the entire inquiry event. Above all other obligations, the researcher remains oriented to the participants and the dynamic relational context at the heart of each research effort. Steps and landmarks are discerned as participants do “what the situation calls for, and in the manner called for” (Anderson, 2007b, p. 52; see also Ayora Talavera & Chaveste Gutierrez, 2009). The whole inquiry event demonstrates readiness, openness, and answerability, not only in the initial phase when the primary author generates data, but all throughout, in every new unfolding of the inquiry effort.

If we long for answers to a question, if we need to determine a best course of action, if we wish to elicit a new range of possibility, or if we want to work together towards a more just and life-giving social transformation, we must remain “answerable”—not to automated abstract methodologies—but to the living ecologies that can lead and move us to action. “If we are to let ‘something’ speak to us of itself, of its own inner ‘shape,’ we need to follow where it leads, to allow ourselves to be moved in a way answerable to its calls” (Katz & Shotter, 2004, p. 78).

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