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Critique, Construction, And Confluence: Journeying With John Shotter

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Chapter 5

Critique, construction, and confluence

Journeying with John Shotter

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I count my relationship with John Shotter – as a friend and dialogic companion – as one of the greatest fortunes of my career. The scholarly dialogues in which we have engaged are echoed – directly or indirectly – in almost all my writings of the past forty years. To be sure, we have not always agreed; but these tensions were ever the catalysts for lively conversation. In what follows I wish to touch on some of the significant chapters in our journeying together. My hope is to accomplish several goals at once. At the outset, this may enable the reader to appreciate the profundity of Shotter's work, and the ways it has entered into the larger intellectual movements of the times. At the same time, I wish to tell a more personal story, one that may furnish some insight into our own particular dialogues, the affinities, and the deviations. Finally, the attempt is to instantiate the relational conceptions that have so pervaded the dialogues in which we have engaged. In this register, this is not a story about John, or about me, but a relationship.

A comrade in critique

Both Shotter and I were trained as experimental psychologists. As our careers got under way, however, both of us also found ourselves 'hearing voices'. These were voices of doubt in the experimental study of human behaviour and its promises for humankind. They were voices from philosophy, literature, the theatre, the arts and others that simply emerged in the course of living engaged and complex lives with others. For me, the exit from the mainstream was first crystallised in 1972, and the publication of my paper, 'Social psychology as history' in the flagship *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. I proposed in this paper that experiments in social psychology were not tapping universal processes, but rather, historically situated actions. What is more, as the discipline educated the public regarding its insights, this education could alter the very patterns under study. Thus, social psychology did not accumulate knowledge, because patterns of human action were always in motion. And the science indeed contributed to these changes. The paper created enormous controversy at the time, contributing to what

was called 'the crisis in social psychology'. The discipline closed ranks, and at a later meeting of the elite organisation, the Society for Experimental Social Psychology, it was simply declared that the crisis was over. No more discussion. I was now on the outside, but *not* looking in.

Rather, my intellectual interests expanded, and with this expansion I began to locate other dissident voices – colleagues in arms. Shotter's 1975 book, *Images of Man in Psychological Research*, was akin to the discovery of gold. Here was another psychologist who was willing to risk academic suicide by raising significant questions about his discipline. Our quarries were quite different. Shotter was primarily concerned with what he saw as a misleading if not injurious image of man created by the 'mechanistic-behaviouristic' approach to psychological study. However, contained within his analysis were certain assumptions that were very much part of my own critique. For one, he viewed the person primarily as a cultural actor, moving within a domain of shared ideas and values. As he wrote, psychologists must treat people 'in terms of their knowledge of their position in a culture; that is, in terms of a knowledge that their actions play in relation to the part played by other people's actions in maintaining or progressing the culture' (1975, 14). Without such an assumption, indeed, my own critique would not make sense. Further, present in his work were formulations that were resonant with my concern with what I called *enlightenment effects*, that is, the impact on culture resulting from the knowledge dispensed by the discipline. As Shotter put it, 'all the different theories of . . . human nature that people produce can be seen as emerging from, and returning to modify, different forms of human action' (1975, 128). Bravo!

It also became clear to me that Shotter was not writing in a vacuum. His work was in dialogue with other British scholars, prominent among them the Oxford philosopher Rom Harré. In the summer of 1979, Mary and I decided to spend time in Oxford with Rom and a coterie of psychologists who were also seeking alternatives to mainstream experimentation. This also provided the opportunity to travel down to Cardiff, Wales, to attend a conference on 'Models of Man'. We were especially keen to hear a presentation by Shotter. John's offering at the conference was impressive: highly sophisticated, articulate and, even if elliptical, rich in imagery and implication. We listened with rapt attention. The floor was then opened to discussion. Our exposure to academic critique in the US had not prepared us for what was to follow. In the US, criticism is typically muted and respectful. The commentators in this context were neither. Nor did their remarks advance our understanding. Simply describing an argument as 'rubbish' does not constitute a counter-argument; it rather speaks to the incapacity of the commentator to deal with what's been heard. In any case, as the evening ended, Mary and I sought out John's company. We were not only impressed with the presentation, but felt he might benefit from a little support. That evening together was the beginning of a lifelong friendship.

In the years immediately following, there were multiple visits, letters and phone calls in which we touched on many issues. The circle of 'renegades' was also expanding at a rapid clip. In the UK, discussions with Rom Harré were enriched by the presence of Michael Billig, Jonathan Potter, Celia Kitzinger, Margaret Wetherall, Mary Douglas, and Ian Parker among others. In Norway there was Ragnar Rommetweit and Jan Smedslund; in Spain the work of Tomas Ibanez and his colleagues; in France Erika Apfelbaum and at least tangentially, Serge Moscovici; in Canada Fran Cherry, Ian Lubeck and Franz Samuelson; and in the US, Jill Morawski, Keith Davis and Ed Sampson, among others. The times were bristling with new and challenging ideas.

Our relations with these individuals further fanned the flames of our dialogic seminars. To sense the intensity, when I was taking a sabbatical at Heidelberg University, John drove down for a visit. In the hills by the Neckar River, there is a wondrous path, the *Philosophenweg*, from which one can view the entire Neckar valley, the river, the town and the medieval castle. The views are breath-taking. As John and I strolled on the Weg, we were deep in conversation – exploring the many intellectual pathways now open to us. At the summit of the walk, however, I realised that John had never actually taken in the view! Now we made it a point to stop all conversation, and simply drink in the sight before us. But even here, I could sense John's eagerness to return to the pathways of the spirit. The view was static, the ideas so very much alive.

Figure 5.1 Reflections on the existing profession bred intense critique. One response was bravado! (Ken Gergen (left) and John Shotter (right))

In these years with John, I also learned much that went beyond the conceptual worlds we explored. There was first an appreciation of John's particular orientation towards scholarship, one I came to view as an *aesthetic craftsmanship*. My own predilection was towards patterns. I scanned intellectual territories, deliberating on the emerging patterns, the disjunctions and the implications. I did not so much attempt to master the intricacies of an author's writings as to seek out the pieces that would bring about the completion of a larger puzzle. One might say that my orientation to the scholars was one of appropriation. John's orientation, in contrast, was one of intimate absorption. I was awed by the way in which John would carefully pore over the lines of a text, pausing to ponder the phrases. To thumb through a book John was reading was to realise that he was not simply reading, but having an intense dialogue. There were incessant underlines, sometimes in different colours, accompanied by marginal comments. Pages often showed signs of wear, suggesting they had been revisited on numerous occasions. And very often, John would recite the lines. These were not mere recitations; the lines were delivered with the full rhetorical power of a well acted Hamlet or Lear. The lines were being tasted, as if seated at the table of a famous chef.

There were also lessons in writing. When I began writing my PhD dissertation I met with the strong criticism of my doctor father, Edward E. Jones. As he rightly put it, I was using as my model a rhetorical form that echoed that of nineteenth-century philosophy. Sentences were long, complex and highly abstract. As Jones admonished, 'If you really have anything to say, make it clear to me.' So, much of my writing up to my acquaintance with Shotter had become scientised – concise, precise and to the point. In this context, I must admit that I was not initially drawn to John's form of writing. For me there was too much ambiguity. I was sometimes puzzled by his formulations, feeling that I was wandering through a cloudy sky with hope that a clearing would soon bring the sunlight of understanding. Some of my scholarly companions experienced similar difficulties, and this was especially disappointing. I so wanted Shotter's work to make a difference to them. Slowly, however, I began to develop a taste for Shotter's form of exposition. What had been opacity became a sense of mystery; where there were unsolved puzzles I realised I was being pushed as reader to join in the search for solutions. His writing challenged me to think along with him, and to cherish the newly emerging insights. There was also a certain elegance about John's writing, and always a subtle passion woven into the fibres. In short, there were ways in which Shotter's writing was *auratic*, possessing an ambience of significant mystery. This has meant a steadily expanding sea of appreciative readers of John's works. I now count myself among them, even while such skills ever elude me.

There is a third Shotterian lesson that launched for me a new way to approach my own theoretical investigations. John and I often talked about the generation of ideas, and how as a theoretician one could or should proceed.

So much theoretical writing seemed timid and inconsequential; often one's case would be built around the work of an emulated theorist of the past, as if the name of the theorist would function as a shield against critique. Then, subtly the writer's own ideas would be secreted into the margins, barely recognisable as challenges to the status quo. There was also the question of whether a theorist must possess a logical structure prior to setting words on paper. Must the theory be clear and coherent to the author before its public articulation? On the contrary, argued John. As he described his approach to writing, one begins with a destination, that is, something important that one wishes to convey – a message, as it were. Then, one simply sets out to reach this destination through writing. As he reasoned, the essential logics will emerge along the way, as one draws resources from multiple sites, wrestles with critiques and imagines possible routes to the destination. How useful this lesson has been, and how awed I have been to find that as I write, the voices of my colleagues – both in the flesh and in the surrounding bookcases – speak me forward.

The constructionist years: Wittgenstein joins the conversation

The intellectual atmosphere of these years was increasingly heated. Everywhere there were challenges to long-standing assumptions and practices. The critical movement was in full swing, with Marxists now joined by feminists, gay and lesbian factions, African American and environmentalist groups, among many others. The literary world was aflame with post-structuralist and deconstructionist challenges to traditional views of textual meaning. Hermeneutic theory was revitalised, as the unsolved problem of interpretation re-emerged from its historical encasement. In philosophy the demise of foundationalist ambitions was clearly at hand, and the philosophy of science was being replaced by a social account of science. These were exciting times in the world of scholarship. Disciplinary boundaries were broken, new freedoms were exercised, and new worlds of possibility were opened. There are many labels for this period of ferment: postmodernism, post-foundationalism, and post-structuralism the most visible. And all of these discussions fed directly into our dialogues.

However, if there were one theorist from whom both John and I drew major sustenance, it was Ludwig Wittgenstein. We were entranced by his later writing, and would often favour each other with quotes drawn from *Philosophical Investigations*, the Blue and Brown Books, and the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*. John ultimately went on to collect his writings on Wittgenstein, and these were made available online by the Taos Institute in 2011.[1] More will be said about this later. However, fortified by our discussions of Wittgenstein, along with a wide range of related writings, we began to move toward several major and quite revolutionary (for the time) conclusions:

- Our language about the world is not derived from the way things are, but has its origins in relationships among people. Thus, scientific accounts of the world are not pictures or maps of the world as it is, but the 'ways of talk' developed by various scientific enclaves. In effect, this meant replacing various forms of realism and essentialism with a constructionist orientation to all truth claims.
- Neither philosophy nor science should be viewed as sources of fundamental truth, but as conversations within their respective traditions. Attempts to freeze these insights into universal, transhistorical structures are misdirected if not crippling.
- The field of psychology is flawed in its attempts to establish laws of psychological functioning. The language of mental life does not function to describe mental states, but functions pragmatically within relationships.

As we also found, we were not alone in moving towards such conclusions. In 1983 a conference was thus organised at Swarthmore College on 'The social construction of the person'. Participants in the conference were drawn from fields of psychology, philosophy, sociology, communication, anthropology and family therapy. In the 1985 publication of *The Social Construction of the Person*,[2] John's contribution both echoed and extended the dialogues in which we had been engaged. The concern with language was expressed in the first lines of his contribution, 'Rather than the study of behaviour itself, I am concerned here with the study of how we talk about ourselves and our behaviour' (p. 167). The implications of this stance for the social construction of science were thus quite clear, 'whenever we speak of atoms, and molecules, and the laws of nature, and so on, we are speaking of what we mean by the expressions atom, molecules, and the laws of nature; they are all expressions associated with a particular way of seeing the world and of manipulating it by the means it provides' (p. 175). When this view is applied to the social sciences, and to psychology in particular, there are critical questions to be raised, for '"the self" is, as I have suggested, a scientific concept devised for scientific purposes: purposes to do with attempts to gain practical mastery' (p. 181). Of major importance for John, scientific accounts stand outside the activities they attempt to understand, and for genuine understanding to occur, it must take place from the inside. One might say that to understand was to dwell *within* the practices of relationships themselves.

At that point in time, the London publishing company Sage boasted a staff of editors in the social sciences who were very much part of the constructionist dialogues. Discussions with the editors thus yielded an opportunity for John and me to launch a book series, Inquiries in Social Construction. In our view, the dialogues that were now sweeping around us were in danger of fragmentation, with the result that what could be a major and much needed shift in the conduct of social science would dissipate into a set of local turf

wars. Needed was a vehicle that would not only demonstrate a common consciousness of constructionist ideas, but would invite dialogue across disciplines. Thus, as we wrote on the jacket copy, the series was 'designed to facilitate, across disciplines and national boundaries, an emergent dialogue within the social sciences which many believe presages a major shift in the western intellectual tradition'. The series went on to generate some nineteen volumes. A sense of the intellectual ferment of the times is revealed by scanning the titles:

Kitzinger, C. (1987) *The Social Construction of Lesbianism.*

Shotter, J., and Gergen, K. J. (eds) (1989). *Texts of Identity.*

Simons, H. (1989) *Rhetoric in the Human Sciences.*

Middleton, D., and Edwards, D. (eds) (1990). *Collective Remembering.*

Semin, G.R., and Gergen, K.J. (eds) (1990). *Everyday Understanding: Social and Scientific Implications.*

Nencel, L., and Pels, P. (eds) (1991). *Constructing Knowledge: Authority and Critique in Social Science.*

Kvale, S. (ed.) (1992) *Psychology and Postmodernism.*

McNamee, S., and Gergen, K.J. (eds) (1992). *Therapy as Social Construction.*

Steier, F. (ed.) (1991). *Research and Reflexivity.*

Shotter, J. (1993). *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life through Language.*

Radtke, H.L., and Stam, H.J. (eds) (1994). *Power/Gender: Social Relations in Theory and Practice.*

Sarbin, T.R., and Kitsuse, J.I. (eds) (1994). *Constructing the Social.*

Simons, H.W., and Billig, M. (1994). *After Postmodernism: Reconstructing Ideology Critique.*

Bakhurst, D., and Sypnowich, C. (eds) (1995). *The Social Self.*

Riikonen, E., and Smith, G.M. (1997). *Re-imagining Therapy: Living Conversations and Relational Knowing.*

Bayer, B.M., and Shotter, J. (eds) (1998). *Reconstructing the Psychological Subject: Bodies, Practices and Technologies.*

Parker, I. (ed.) (1998). *Social Constructionism, Discourse and Realism.*

Hepworth, J. (1999). *The Social Construction of Anorexia Nervosa.*

Fee, D. (ed.) (2000). *Pathology and the Postmodern: Mental Illness as Discourse and Experience.*

We terminated the series in 2000, not for the lack of good material, but because there was no longer a major need. Constructionist ideas, in one form or another, were now everywhere in motion. In disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, communication and micro-sociology, such ideas were indeed receding into the common-sense background from which one did one's work.

As a professional psychologist, one of the most important outcomes of the constructionist dialogues for me was the realisation that psychological discourse was itself a construction. Thus, the vast discourse of the mind – pivotal to our ways of life in the West – was ontologically optional. I saw John as a close companion in exploring the implications of this realisation. In my view, one of the most important aspects of John's particular contribution to the series, *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life through Language*, was his implicit critique of dualism. As John reasoned, mental talk should not be viewed as representational, that is, depicting a uniquely mental world. Rather, such talk was used by people in the conduct of their everyday lives. We use such talk as a means of relating. For both of us, this idea fundamentally changed the way in which we understood the discipline of psychological science. It was pointless to engage in the 'study of the mind' as if it were some sort of object to be observed or interrogated. As John wrote, 'Why do we seem so fixated, so to speak, upon the idea that there *must* be, somewhere in everyone, a "mind"' (p. 24). And, echoing our readings in Wittgenstein, 'For "mind", as such, ceases to be something to be explained, and becomes instead a rhetorical device, something we talk of at various different times for various different purposes' (p. 29). To these rhetorical devices for constructing and reconstructing the self, John had devoted an entire volume, *Social Accountability and Selfhood,* in the preceding year.

These years rippled with excitement, new insights abounded and our dialogues left us both inspired and newly charged. To provide a flavor of those times, I share a portion of a small thank-you note that John left with Mary and me after a visit to our home.

> Dearest Ken and Mary,
> Another magic time. What happens to make them so? Some kind of resonating that produces total enlivenment. The fountainhead is with you, and I just immerse myself in the flow and go . . . you seem to have some key to me that others don't use.

Of course, John was simply being gracious to attribute to us the source of the enlivenment. We were all aware that the outcome was relational, and this consciousness made its way increasingly into our writings. John led the way.

Inspirations and contentions

John's writings have always been – and continue to be – a source of lively inspiration. But one of John's concepts has had a profound effect on my intellectual trajectory. This was the concept of *joint action*. The term had been coined by Herbert Blumer (1986) in 1969, and referred to the way in which the many diverse acts of individuals contribute to the pattern of society as a whole. Each individual action might be carried out for its own

purposes, but social patterns were effectively the result of joint action. John's first use of the phrase was in 1980, in an essay titled 'Action, joint action and intentionality'. Although carrying traces of Blumer, John's emphasis was micro-social. As he emphasised, people together create a shared world – their reality – but this reality cannot be traced back to the desires or wishes of the participating individuals. Joint action thus stood as dramatic alternative to the more traditional idea of inter-action, in which self-contained individuals act upon each other in cause and effect sequences. And too, the concept added a new dimension to Wittgenstein's account of language games. Meaning did not derive from individual minds, but from the coordinated actions of those who are playing. For me this was a pivotal turning point in my intellectual life. It sparked a decades-long deliberation on how to conceptualise social process in a way that did not depend on distinct units as its starting place. For John and I together, it led to our single jointly written article, 'Social construction: knowledge, self, others, and continuing the conversation' (Shotter and Gergen, 1994). As I saw it, John never attempted to fix the meaning of the concept of joint action; its polysemous character was its very strength. Thus, in our article together, John was kind enough to allow me to elaborate the concept in a way that set the stage for years of later work. I will say more about this shortly.

Yet, in spite of this affinity toward a relational reconstruction of the person, there was what I felt to be a new turn in John's work, one that was to place an intellectual wedge between us for some years. Possibly for John this was not a new turn, as the grounds could be located in his early work, *Images of Man in Psychological Research*. As mentioned earlier, there he had criticised scientific depictions of human action for their 'view from the outside'. As he saw it, psychologists used these depictions for purposes of mastery over the 'objects' of their gaze. As he advanced, genuine understanding takes place within the relational process itself. Thus, by the early 1990s, John was writing about a *knowing of the third kind*, neither a 'knowing that' something is the case, nor a personal 'knowing how', but a knowing from within the situation. Although I saw this as a conceptual *tour de force*, it was an intellectual move of precarious potential. It seemed to me that to account for such a 'knowing within' would leave the theorist with two primary options, both of which were freighted with difficulties. On the one hand he could try to construct an entirely new vocabulary of relational process, that is, a vocabulary in which there were no individual actors, per se, but a continuous stream of joint-activity. But this choice would essentially recapitulate the problem of the outsider, articulating a 'knowing that' from a third-person perspective. Like the traditional psychologist, he would be relying on an alien language to 'depict' the nature of relations. On the other hand, he could attempt to reveal a knowing with from the inside, from the perspective of those engaged in joint activity. However, in this case he would run the risk of reverting to the very kind of individualist-atomistic tradition the account was designed to

replace – singular individuals, living within their own experience. As I saw it, John was prone to take this risk.

It was thus that John began to develop a full range of highly innovative concepts. He wrote much, for example, about the 'rhetorically responsive' individual, one who responds sensitively to the actions of others. This view was amplified by Katz and Shotter (1996) in their writing about the importance in the diagnostic interview of closely attending to the 'patient's voice', and later their focus on those 'striking moments' in a conversation in which one gains the kind of insight that may significantly alter the dialogic trajectory (Katz and Shotter, 2004). Slowly I felt, there was movement away from the relational process in itself, and a reverting to two fundamentally separate individuals in interaction. Shotter's later writings on 'withness thinking' had this same feel. As he wrote,

> *Withness-thinking and acting* is a form of reflective interaction that involves coming into contact with an other's living being, with their utterances, their bodily expressions, their words, their 'works'. It gives rise not to a 'seeing' for what is 'sensed' is invisible; nor to an interpretation, for our responses occur spontaneously and directly in our living encounters with an other's expressions . . .
>
> (2010, 179)

Even a touch of introspection entered the scene, as John (2008) wrote about 'identifying the nature of *felt understandings*' (p. 84). And the concept of joint action, my early love, became something entirely different in a 2008 work, 'Joint action comes into being when, in their meetings with each other, people's activities become spontaneously and responsively intertwined or entangled'. As result of their 'mutual influence', as he put it, they 'will have come to embody different ways of perceiving, thinking, talking, acting, and valuing' (p. 36). To be sure, these were eminently sensible innovations – but for me, they sustained the tradition from which we had both been liberated.

There was a second issue that invited an intellectual distance, and in retrospect, I now see it in terms of an ambiguity that has always hovered over the constructionist realm. For me, the constructionist turn was tied closely to the more general critique of foundational philosophy of science, and specifically to its inimical consequences for inquiry in psychology and related sciences. Thus, I had been drawn to Shotter's *Images of Man* because of its synchrony with the more general critical movement in the social sciences, and its challenge to the foundationalist claims to value-free knowledge. Our continuously engaging discussions of Wittgenstein were, for me, important in terms of the insights they provided into the linguistic production of scientific knowledge and its implications for the limits of scientific realities. And, for me, both these points of affinity with John were linked to the emergence of deconstruction and reader response theory in literary circles, and most importantly to the phalanx

of writings in the history of science, the sociology of knowledge, and the social studies of science. All pointed to an alternative to empiricist foundationalism, namely a social constructionist metatheory of science.

What I failed to realise at the time was that John's aims had become quite different from mine. Where I was struggling with a successor project to empiricism, John was working steadfastly on a replacement to the mechanistic vision of man that had been spawned by the empiricist orientation to knowledge. He wished to 'situate social constructionist studies not only in a conversational background or context, but also in the moment to moment meeting between two or more persons' (1993, 31). I was primarily concerned with meta-theory, a way of understanding all knowledge claims, while John was attempting to generate a particular kind of knowledge claim. Now, from the meta-theoretical standpoint, there is no vision of human nature that is demanded by 'the way things are'. All claims of this sort are constructions, and the primary questions concern the cultural consequences of adopting one construction as opposed to another. Thus, it seemed premature to rush into an account of human action that reified the constructionist metatheory – at least without acknowledging its constructed character.

In any case, in several of his writings John waxed critical of the constructionist movement. For one, it was too heavily linguistic. He found its excessive focus on language (e.g. narrative, metaphor, rhetoric) blinded us to the fully embodied character of human existence (see e.g. Shotter, 2008, 2010). For me, the critique was off the mark, and this was primarily because he seemed to be taking aim at the meta-theory as if it were an attempt to construct the nature of social life. At the meta-theoretical level, the focus on language was pivotal in understanding the structure of knowledge claims in their historical and cultural location. Such a meta-theory did not require any particular concept of the person or social life. All are constructions with varied cultural implications. This included theories that borrowed from the meta-theory (i.e. realities are constructed in relations). However, to demand of the meta-theory a disquisition on embodiment was both unnecessary and problematic. At the meta-theoretical level, it was important to remain conceptually lean. That is, a constructionist meta-theory is itself a construction. To load it with embodied actors would suggest that it was a candidate for truth. And to add bodies would open the way to including all sorts of other realities, including power, social structure, the environment and of course, thinking, feeling and perceiving. At this point, what is premised as an orientation, profound in its potential, lapses into yet another competitor for the final truth about knowledge.

Relational wisdom: from knowledge to practice

In 2009 I completed what for me was an important work, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*. In the Prologue of that book I wrote that there

was not a single word in the volume that had not in some way been touched by my relationship with John. Later, John conveyed to me how much he liked the book. One very important conclusion that can be drawn from our journey is that differences in the position one takes on any issue should not undermine the relationship with those who differ. For one, emerging from our constructionist background, there is no ultimate justification for any particular construction of the real and the good. There was no need to fight about the true nature of experience, of thought, embodiment theory, and so on. Because all we could do is to construct the meanings of these words and how they might be embedded in action. And even if one of us questioned the logical and ideological implications of a given formulation, such questioning could in no way be lethal. Constructionism invites a certain humility when it comes to offering opinions on how things actually are or should be. Nor, do such theoretical propositions have any necessary implications for action. The Christian Bible and the Koran have both been interpreted in ways both nurturing and annihilating. It is only when propositions become attached to declarations of TRUE and RIGHT that bags are needed for bodies. And finally, if all meaning issues from relational process, then it is this process we should treasure and sustain.

It is within this context that one may appreciate why the intellectual differences sometimes separating John and I have never affected the nourishing quality of our relationship. Indeed, there is a range of affinities to which our writings have more recently led us. I shall complete this offering

Figure 5.2 Copenhagen, 2014: sustaining the synergy
(Ken Gergen (left) and John Shotter (right))

with a discussion of only one of these: Perhaps ironically, while both of us have spent a substantial parts of our career engaged in theoretical and philosophical exploration, this engagement has ultimately given way to a profound concern with *relational practices*. As I pointed out earlier, John had been critical of the 'way of theory', that is, the traditional attempt to establish rational orders of understanding. However, I trace the origin of our joint-concern with practices to an earlier sharing, namely the immersion in Wittgenstein's writings. Both of us had drawn great nourishment from Wittgenstein's (1952) view of word meaning as deriving from its use in social interchange, and the location of such interchange in broader forms of life. Initially we had focused most of our attention on language – its function in constructing realities, and the forms of life that it supported. However, this investment opened up two further paths.

The first was an expanded appreciation of discourse as pragmatic action. Both of us had abandoned the conception of language as an external expression of an internal mind. Indeed, it is partly this realisation that has invited post-structuralists in general to replace the word 'language' with 'discourse'. However, by viewing discourse as pragmatic action, there was no principled reason to distinguish between spoken and written language and other forms of human activity (e.g. listening, walking, dancing). The second impetus towards action was derived from Wittgenstein's nestling language within broader forms of life. Adding to the emphasis on discourse as action was thus a concern with the broader institutions to which our relational actions contributed. Neither of us was so much invested in carrying out research on existing institutions; the outcomes would be cultural constructions in any case. The challenge, then, was not to 'get it right' about the present so much as to engage in practical efforts at social change.

Of course, the Taos Institute had long been dedicated to bringing constructionist ideas together with professional practices. And, to be sure, most of our related contributions had been heavily conceptual. However, in these recent years the centre of gravity has shifted increasingly towards practice. For me this meant that over half of my 2009 book, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*, illuminated what I viewed as illustrative practices. For Shotter, the shift is earmarked in the Preface to his 2008 revision of *Conversational Realities*, he writes:

> Now that I have 'retired' from academic life, and turned at last to working with more practitioners, with people who have to face new and unique circumstances every day . . . I find myself better able to appreciate their needs more clearly. As a consequence I feel that much more needs to be said. General claims are not enough. Practice is *not* a matter of applying theories! . . . Central to the new, more practical approach to social constructionism . . . is a focus on the *spontaneous, expressive-responsivity* of growing and living forms.
>
> (pp. ii–vi)

Then, in the Prologue of his 2010 volume, *Social Construction on the Edge*, he opens with, 'This is a book for practitioners' (p. v). This same concern is also represented in Shotter's close working relationship with therapists such as Harlene Anderson, Tom Andersen and Jim Wilson, as well as his wife, Cherrie Ravello. As well, it is represented in his consulting work with Patricia Shaw and Theodore Taptiklis. All this is nothing to say about his numerous contributions to conferences and workshops in therapy, organisational change and dialogic practices. For me, however, it is the practice of our relationship in which John has most visibly excelled. John has been a true comrade for all seasons, inspiring, informing, challenging and most significantly honouring in depth the relational process of which we are a part.

Notes

1 www.worldsharebooks.net.
2 Available as an open source publication at www.worldsharebooks.net.

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